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GONE TO GROUND

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Earth Stopped.

Farewell Victoria.

GONE TO GROUND

A NOVEL

by

T. H. WHITE

COLLINS

48 PALL MALL LONDON

1935

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CHAPTER ONE

The end of the world came quickly. The communists went for the fascists tooth and nail ; the liberal anarchists joined in ; the British Israelites proclaimed a pogrom of the Scottish nationalists, and pulled down Stirling Castle whilst the latter were burning the Great Pyramid ; somebody had the amusing idea of assassinating all the European sovereigns and dictators simultaneously, which was fortunately successful ; the protestant church had a meeting on the subject of divorce ; lynch law was repealed in America ; Lord Beaverbrook, in full armour, led a crusade against the Paynims, but was drowned in the channel after a decisive engagement with Lady Houston's yacht, Britannia ; the OGPU, the storm troops, and Sir Oswald Mosley's bodyguard committed hari-kiri ; the franc dropped to 124.21, amidst the shrieks of the populace and scenes which had not been witnessed since the massacre of St. Bartholomew ; all the civil aeroplanes of all the nations opened convenient slits in the underside of the fuselage and took to the air with loads of little bombs ; the regular fighting aircraft deposited their explosives with fatal precision, doing their step-dives from ten thousand feet so beautifully that you were quite enraptured for a moment before you were

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definitely dead. In fact, everything went like clockwork ; even the clockwork bombs.

Within a week the world was over. It came as a surprise to some of the older-fashioned people : and particularly to a party that was following the Flat Hat Hounds on the last day of the year. There were six of them, and they had enjoyed a remarkable run. They were breaking up their fox on the outskirts of an industrial town called Beding when the aeroplanes arrived.

The hunting party consisted of the Countess of Scamperdale ; the Professor of Astral Biology at Oxford ; Pansy the Photo King ; Frostyface, huntsman to the F.H.H., Miss Mary Springwheat, the grand-daughter of a yeoman farmer ; and a certain Mr. Marx, a youthful communist who had lately fallen in love with Mary and taken to hunting in order to win her favour.*

The members of this collection had just said good-bye to each other, and were waiting for the bomb which was to put an end to their adventures, when a

**It will be remembered that Mr. Soapsey Sponge and Mr. Facey Romford, both horsemen of the very first rank, were compelled to retire to Australia ; where they founded a bank. The joint venture of two such rational characters was naturally successful. Mr. Sponge found several more nuggets and Mr. Romford was able to re-establish the Watkins' fortune on a prosperous footing. Lucy (née Glitters) presented Soapsey with a boy in 1860, and Cassandra Cleopatra (née Watkins)*

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round lid opened in the middle of the field in which they were standing. It had a shining underside, like aluminium, and the turf grew on top of it in a circle, as if it were a green iced cake. Under the lid there was the shaggy head of a very aged gentleman, with whiskers. He looked like a trap-door spider.

"Soapey, me lad," said the spider, speaking downwards towards its navel, "the balloon's gone up."

The navel replied in muffled tones, "Ord rot them."

The Professor was the first to move. He sprinted for the trap-door, pushed the spider backwards by putting the sole of his foot on the middle of its nose, and caught the lid before it fell. There was a subterranean rumble and a plaintive voice remarked, "A fall h'is a h'awful thing."

"Get in," said the Professor.

"What about the horses?" asked the Countess.

"What about the hounds?" asked the huntsman.

"Get in," said the Professor, "quickly." He dug

presented Facey with a girl in 1875. The boy was called Jack Romford Sponge (as a compliment to Facey and in memory of poor Spraggon), and the girl was called Lucy Sponge Romford (as a compliment to Soapey and his wife). The two children were brought back to England and grew up together. Lucy the second went on the stage in 1895, through Mrs. Sponge's influence, and married the Earl of Scamperdale in 1903. Jack went to Oxford, where he became the Regius Professor of Astral Biology.

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Frosty in the ribs, gave the Countess a good push behind, grabbed Scavenger and Scrutiny, cut short Mr. Marx's chivalrous attempt to help Mary down the hole (by stamping on her fingers), threw away Pansy's top hat as an unnecessary armament in crowded quarters, and hurled in the dog and the bitch before the vanguard was at the bottom of the ladder. He turned to survey the scene. A market gardener who had headed the fox was standing by, an interested spectator, leaning on his rake.

"Get in," said the Professor.

"I hought to tell you," began the market gardener, in a hesitating voice. . . .

The Professor took away his rake, hit him on the head with it, shovelled the unconscious body down the rungs. He turned round once more, to bid farewell to the upper regions.

The red bellies of the aeroplanes, hanging like a shoal of goldfish in the incredibly distant bowl of sunset, returned a gleaming radiance to the fires of earth. Beding was an effulgent blaze towards the north; in the east a haystack roared with flames; southwards the guns of London rippled the rhododactulous aether. Placidly in the west, and undisturbed by such a plethora of imitations, the sun continued to set according to custom, like a benign hostess in a drawing-room surrounded by mirrors. The Professor shook his fist at humanity, scrambled down the ladder, shut the aluminium cover with a muffled clang.

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It was a long low dug-out, with concrete joists and heavy walls, streaky with moisture. The electric light shone balefully. At the far end there was a sort of bar, with glasses of every shape and colour; venetian porpoises supporting crimson dishes for champagne, scandinavian troll-shapes of smoky texture for the longer drinks, alchemical crystal goblets, like bulbous aquaria, to cherish the viscous urbanity of encouraging brandy. This end of the dug-out looked like a booth at a Fun Fair, anxious to be reduced to its melodious atoms at a penny for three balls. The other end bore traces of the gymnasium, the laboratory, and the smuggler's den. It was tightly packed with cylinders of oxygen, electrical apparatus, bales, bits of rope, sacks, hen coops, a refrigerator, and a mechanical horse for exercising the liver at a trot. The middle of the compartment, or alley-way between the two ends, was like a village store. Hams hung from the cross beams, together with strings of onions, fly papers, sanitary conveniences, suits of winter and summer clothes, two gas masks, and a canary. There were also a pair of camp beds, two leather chairs, a horse-hair sofa, three tobacco jars, and four caricatures by Spy. The walls were lined with fishing rods, gun cases, and boxes of cartridges. Everything possessed an utility value: everything except the enormous moose's head which hung over the bar, as a concession to pure art.

The Professor rattled down the ladder, to find the situation tense. The invading party had assumed

strategic positions, behind the bales and the mechanical horse. At the other end of the corridor was the bar, and behind the bar stood the figures of their hosts. There were two of them. The spider, looking unruffled by his fall, because he was already so dishevelled by nature as to be beyond further inroads, held a brandy goblet above his head and was about to throw it. His pugnacious brick-red face wore an expression of tranquil relish; peering out of its tangle of white whiskers, like a lion in a bramble bush at Whipsnade. He was talking to himself. His companion, a man of similar age (that is to say, 112) was aiming a claret bottle at Mr. Marx. If he resembled the spider in point of age, the second figure was different in appearance. His white whiskers (he wore whiskers too) were rolled in a tight coil under the chin, like a Victorian ringlet, and a cigar protruded jauntily from the corner of his mouth. His thick but dapper shooting coat, impervious to rain or changes in temperature, was seamed by an expert, soignée, serviceably cut. His was a roman nose: the spider's, more pointed, quested the air for opposition like that of an intelligent fox.

"Facey, my buoy," said the spider, addressing himself with kindly encouragement, "who the deuce have we here? Such a set of nasty, sneakin', filibusterin', mean-spirited wretches I never have seen."

"Never," added the spider, "since the death of me Oncle Gilroy."

"Father!" exclaimed the Countess, ducking

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hastily to evade the goblet which exploded on the wall behind her. She extended her arms in a dramatic gesture. "Father! I always knew you couldn't be dead."

The old gentleman picked up a bottle of Madeira.

"It's Lucy," declaimed the Countess desperately.

"Don't you remember your own little Lucy?"

"G-a-r away," said Mr. Romford.

At this moment the Professor reached the bottom of the ladder.

"Father!" he exclaimed, extending his arms to the gentleman with the bottle of claret.

"Oh, no," observed Mr. Sponge. "That takes a bit of believin', upon my word."

"Uncle!" exclaimed the Countess, extending her arms diagonally towards the latest speaker.

"Uncle!" exclaimed the Professor, extending his arms towards the first.

Mr. Romford put down his bottle of Madeira and turned towards Mr. Sponge. "Soapey," he said, "who is this gel?"

"Facey," said Mr. Sponge, "who is this boy?"

"But it's us," exclaimed the Professor and the Countess in unison. "Don't you remember Australia, and the Bank, and the Nuggets, and Lucy Glitters, and Cassandra Cleopatra Watkins?"

Mr. Sponge put down his bottle of claret and turned to his companion. "B-O-Y JOVE!" he exclaimed. "I distinctly remember a girl called Watkins. Was she your wife or mine?"

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"Yours," said Mr. Romford promptly.

"Not so fast," replied Mr. Sponge, extending a well manicured hand. "Give the hounds room, if you please."

The Countess gave her courtesy uncle an angry look. Then she turned to Mr. Romford. "So," she said, "you have forgotten your own daughter, not to mention your wife!"

"And how on earth," interrupted the Professor, "do you come to be alive?"

Mr. Romford coughed apologetically.

"Sponges," said his partner, "are a long-lived race, old boy."

"Romfords," said the spider, "have always been a puzzle to keep down. Dash it, there's nothing difficult in that."

"Still," protested the Professor, "a hundred and twelve is far too much."

"W-h-o-y, no," retorted Facey. "One crops up, you understand."

Mr. Sponge said, "You can't keep a good fox underground."

"But it's impossible," said the Countess.

"When me Oncle Gilroy died," said Mr. Romford, "leavin' me nothing but what I could borrow off poor old Jog, you would have said that it was impossible for me to be the master of two packs of hounds in so many years: yes, and to give a slap-up Ball too, at me own country seat. And to marry the daughter of a millionaire, penniless though she proved to be."

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"When I first visited Benjamin Buckram," said Mr. Sponge, "with Mogg's Cab Fares in my pocket, you would have found it difficult to believe that I should be hunting the Scattercash hounds by the end of the season, and winning the Grand Aristocratic on Hercules (little though I wanted that distinction), nor yet that I should soon be offering to lend £116,300 at three and a half per cent., to noblemen, gentlemen, and officers in the household troops."

"Well," said the Professor weakly, "you seem to be there, and so I suppose we ought to congratulate you. We don't believe it, all the same."

"Nothing partic'lar," said Mr. Sponge complacently.

"Oh, fiddle!" said Facey. "It's all in the day's work."

The Professor turned to the others.

"These gentlemen," said he, "are Mr. Facey Romford and Mr. Soapey Sponge, of whom you ought to have heard. Mr. Romford is the father of the Countess of Scamperdale: now, I am afraid, a widow."

"Widow!" exclaimed the Countess, suddenly remembering the late earl's leg, which was hanging in a tree; and she would have liked to dab her eyes, except for her veil.

"Niece," said Mr. Sponge reprovingly, "surely you never went and married old Scamp?"

"By Scamp," said the Professor, "you refer to the eighth earl. Lucy's earl was the tenth."

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"How time flies," said Mr. Sponge.

"To go on with the introductions," continued the Professor sternly, "Mr. Sponge here is my papa. The Countess and I were brought up together. She went on the stage instead of joining me in holy wedlock, and consequently married the tenth earl instead. It was shortly before this match that both our parents disappeared. It wasn't their first disappearance either."

Soapey cleared his throat and Mr. Romford blew his nose.

"How could you?" asked the Countess.

Mr. Romford pulled a few hairs out of his chin, regarded them with a puzzled expression, and put them in his mouth.

"Well?" enquired the Professor.

Mr. Sponge took comfort by putting his hand into his pocket and feeling the battered copy of 'Mogg's Fares.'

"Oh, the deuce," muttered Mr. Romford.

"Look here," exclaimed Soapey, after a long pause, "Facey and me are your fathers. Little children should be seen and not heard."

"That cock won't fight," replied the Professor sternly.

"W-h-o-y," said Mr. Romford, "if you are going to be ondootiful, I suppose we can have a bit of a fling as well. Ord dash it, it's only human natur'."

"Do you mean to say," exclaimed the Countess, "that you went away because you got tired of us?"

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"One has to live one's life," said Mr. Sponge, wheedlingly.

"After all," pleaded Mr. Romford, "it was only for fifty years."

The Countess suddenly collapsed. "Well," she said tearfully, "it's so sudden, I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything at all," said Mr. Sponge. "Have a glass of brandy, and kiss your uncle."

"But are they brothers?" asked Mary Spring-wheat timidly, speaking for the first time. "Because, if so, why don't they have the same name? It does seem all so difficult, and being so terribly old, and in the middle of a revolution, too."

"Not legally brothers," said the Professor, "only by adoption. Mr. Sponge and Mr. Romford were bound together by so many ties, including an I.O.U. for £7 10s., that their children naturally treated them as such."

"There!" exclaimed Mr. Romford, turning upon Soapey in a high state of excitement, "and your own buoy remembers it."

"Fair play's a jewel," said Mr. Sponge vaguely.

"So it is," assented Facey vigorously. "Money, if you please."

"I gave you a cheque," said Mr. Sponge, "in Brisbane, in '87. Wouldn't cheat a man, if it was ever so."

Mr. Romford began to roll up his shirt sleeves; revealing a pair of simian arms, the colour of a dead chicken or yesterday's milk.

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"Now look here," said the Professor, "Lucy is just going to kiss her adopted uncle, and you can't fight him now."

"Sivin-pund-ten," retorted Mr. Romford truculently, "with interest from 1852."

"Excuse me," said Pansy tactfully, "but here we are in an underground dungeon, most of us total strangers, some of us apparently more than a hundred years old, in a new war, with an unconscious market-gardener, and two hounds trying to eat the canary: couldn't we settle the I.O.U. a little later on?"

"What's a war to me?" asked Mr. Romford.

Mr. Sponge was the essence of goodwill. "Look here," he said, "I tell you what I'll do. I'll pay you again, for the last time, mind, if you'll give me a receipt before all these people. Not that I didn't pay you in '87, but in order to avoid unpleasantness."

Facey was too surprised to speak.

"Good old dad!" exclaimed the Professor.

"My long lost boy," added Soapey affectionately, "will lend me the money, I feel sure."

"Good old Soapey," said Mr. Romford immediately, "Oi'll write the receipt. Better make it eight pund fer the interest."

"Ten, if you like," said Mr. Sponge nonchalantly.

"But I haven't got the money," cried the Professor.

"I'm in my hunting clothes."

"You can owe it to him," said Mr. Sponge.

"How much have you got?" asked Mr. Romford suspiciously.

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"Nothing," said the Professor.

"But surely," began the Countess. . . .

"Hush!" cried the Professor.

"He's bound to have a tenner," said Soapey.

"Make out the receipt."

Mr. Romford was already writing busily.

"I refuse to pay," said the Professor.

"Oh, come," said Soapey.

"Whoy, it's yer own father," said Facey.

"An ungrateful scalliwag of a father," shouted the Professor with deep emotion. "He's a rapacious scalliwag. He's a welshing trickster!"

"That's actionable," said Soapey judicially.

"Knock him on the head," said Facey. "I should."

"Try," exclaimed the Professor, rolling up his sleeves in turn.

Mr. Sponge said coolly, "I wouldn't demean myself."

Mr. Romford had an inspiration. "I tell ye what," he said. "We'll let him keep his money. Then we can play écarté."

"Nap," said Mr. Sponge. "That we can all play."

"Where are those damned cards?" asked Facey, scrambling about in a great hurry behind the bar.

"In your pocket, I expect," said Soapey, scarcely concealing his impatience.

"But I say," said Mary Springwheat. "I do think we ought to have a bit of explanation."

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There rose a confused and melancholy cry from the other members of the party.

"How did they come to make this dug-out?" asked Mr. Marx.

"It's all so muddling," said the Countess. "Are we in a war, or is it a revolution?"

"Things," said Frostyface, touching his cap respectfully, "do seem to have 'appened rather quickly."

"Are these gentlemen still alive, or are we all dead?"

The Professor made a wan attempt to accept the diversion. He threw out his chest, inflated his cheeks, extended his arms hospitably in both directions. "Gentlemen," he proclaimed, "we require a general introduction."

("I am almost sure," said Facey, "that you locked them in the tantalus.")

"Father," said the Professor, "allow me to introduce Miss Springwheat."

"How-de-do," said Mr. Sponge. ("I'm perfectly certain that you put them in your pocket.")

"Mr. Marx," continued the Professor, "is engaged to Miss Springwheat, to be married."

There was no reply.

"Mr. Duquesne," cried the Professor, dragging him forward, "is a famous society photographer, and hunts with the F.H.H."

Pansy bowed with a shiver, like a willow in the winds of spring.

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(" You had them in your hand," said Mr. Romford. " It was your deal, if you remember.")

" Frostyface," concluded the Professor, playing his last card, " is the grandson of the huntsman who worked for the eighth earl."

Both the aged gentlemen came round from behind the bar. " Frosty, my boy," they said in unison, " we're glad to meet you. You haven't seen a pack of cards ? "

" Gentlemen, no," said Frostyface. " Perhaps you have them in your pockets."

" Look in yours," said Soapey.

" My dear feller," said Facey, " look in yours."

" Well, then, we'll look in each other's."

" Just like America," said Pansy.

Mr. Sponge plunged his hand into his partner's nondescript coat and extracted three rabbit wires tangled up with a good deal of string. Mr. Romford pulled ' Moggs ' out of the shooting jacket, and the three of diamonds fell out.

" There ! " exclaimed Mr. Romford.

Lovingly, one by one, he extracted the ancient printed oblongs from their lair. The backs were the same colour as the faces, a warm and dusky tint faintly reminiscent of the oldest masters. Most of the cards were dog-eared, creased in half, mended with stamp paper, stained with wine and paraffin. Their patina was perfect marble and ambergris. Like flies, long preserved in pre-dynastic resin, the fingermarks retained the freshness of the very oldest fossils.

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" Oi wouldn't have lost them," said Mr. Romford tenderly, " not for a thousand pound."

" They're the very same cards," said Soapey proudly, " with which I lost my seven-pound-ten, at Mrs. End's, above the saddler's."

The two old men stood for a moment in silent reverence, looking down at the bundles of potted history in their claws. The hooked fingers held them gently, benignly, and with a certain ominous familiarity.

" You haven't a clean pack, have you ? " asked the Professor piteously, as his father had asked before him.

" W-h-o-y, no, we haven't," replied Facey. " W-h-o-y, no, we haven't : but, honour bright, these are all right and fair."

" Surely," pleaded the Professor, " we needn't start this minute ? "

" W-h-o-y, no," said Facey. " If you like I'll give you a tune on me flute."

Mr. Sponge smiled sardonically.

CHAPTER TWO

It was only by the barest of margins that the Professor got away with it. If it had not been for the music and the cards nobody would have consented to a Decameron. But they had the flute and Nap alternately for about twelve hours, and after that they were ready to embrace any alternative. Some of them still had a little money left, which they were anxious to save, and all of them knew by heart and apprehended with agony the peculiar flat which Facey was liable to introduce in the second bar of the Merry Swiss Boy. The Professor's suggestion that they should tell a story each, to pass the time, was carried in the teeth of the fiercest opposition from Mr. Sponge and Mr. Romford. Rather than play another card or listen to another note the others would have murdered their aged mothers in their beds. They had all heard the Professor's stories before, and they knew what they were in for. But it was that or music.

"Go on," said the Countess. "I suppose you'd better begin."

Mr. Marx and Mary Springwheat retired to sit on the floor together, behind the mechanical horse. The rest began to group themselves on chairs and sofa.

"If we've got to hear stories," said Mr. Sponge with an offensive yawn, "I think at least they ought to be sportin' ones."

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"A sporting Decameron," said Pansy. "What a good idea!"

Then they all fidgeted unhappily; assumed fish-like expressions; and the Professor began:

"I am afraid," began the Professor, laying his finger-tips together like Sherlock Holmes, "that I shan't be able to put this story across in an adequate way. It is scarcely a story at all, since it lacks everything but the skeleton of a plot. It is not exciting. Yet it is one of the few things in my life that have been perfectly beautiful and significant. Perhaps it could be defined as a succession of states of feeling. For this reason it is the most difficult story I know. It means that I have got to communicate emotions to you and not incidents; and, of course, while almost any words will do for incidents, the emotions are too delicate for communication in any but the most considered terms.

"It happened on the twenty-first of November in 1899, when the century was within forty days of its death. There was an epic meaning in the air itself, and people still wore beards. Also there was a pea soup fog in London, and something very much like it in the country.

"I was staying with the Slocdolagers, to have a week with the Laverick Wells. The mastership had come back to the Slocdolager family in 1862, when poor Waffles broke his neck at Wooleyburn, and it had stayed there. They were lovely people. They

hunted practically speaking on the subscription ; for the family had never had a bean, and never was likely to have. They lived for nothing else. The old man, who had been master before and after Waffles, and who had abdicated in favour of his son in 1873, was ninety-nine and still went out. They used to prop him up on a white mare that was in her thirty-second year and lead him along the lanes as well as they could. He was stone blind, but he could hear the hounds perfectly. His son, who was seventy-four and had just handed the pack over to the grandson, used to trot beside him with the lead rein. He in his turn was stone deaf, but could see like a pigeon. So they got on very well together. They had called each other by their Christian names since 1880. Young John would cup his hand behind his deaf ear and ask anxiously, " Can you hear them, Tommy ? " And old Thomas, peering forward through his blind eyes that could just tell daylight from dark, would answer, " Yes, Johnny, I can hear them distinctly ; but I can't see them very well." Meanwhile the grandson, who at fifty years of age was still known as young Tommy, hunted the hounds himself.

" I don't know why I'm telling you about the Slodolagers, except that they were a part of the general beauty of the day. It was not the kind of family that could afford to offer mounts to their friends wholesale, and the only reason why they were able to turn me out was that the second whip

had got concussion. So I was given his horses for a week and told to do his job. I enjoyed it and felt important. That's another thread in the pattern. There were the lovely old Slocdolagers, and the feeling of importance, and the young blood in my heart ; and then there was the mist.

“ Young Tommy always insisted on hunting if he could see one field, and that was exactly what we could see on the twenty-first of November. The fog looked impossible at breakfast-time, but we took the hounds over to Whirleypool Windmill in case it should lift. At twelve o'clock it was getting clear, so we moved off to Ribston Wood. This is a long covert on a hillside, and the field was usually kept on the valley below. There wasn't much of a field, only about twenty out, and after we had got them settled under the care of Johnny Slocdolager the hounds were put into covert. I had been sent off to the top corner of the wood, in case he went away over the brow of the hill. I hustled off, with an expression on my face which was meant to imply a dignified and business-like reserve ; and put myself where I was meant to be, feeling very magnificent in scarlet and top hat and the glory of office. It was clearer in covert and I could see the fretty chervil of the trees fading into the fog, like skeletons of the maidenhair fern made out of smoke and cobwebs. Then I heard the horn unnaturally clear, and almost immediately the hounds were speaking to it at the lower end. I was

still staring to get a glimpse of them when the fox broke within a couple of yards, a fine sandy fellow with a look of defiance in his wild eyes. He never saw me at all, but made off at a determined pace towards a dim hedge, into which he presently faded. I halloo'd him away. Young Tommy got the hounds to the line quickly, and we started on a roaring scent ; leaving the field in the valley below to take the best comfort that they might from the parting horn.

“ As soon as we were well away from the wood it became obvious that the mist was coming down again. It was also obvious that we wouldn't be able to stop hounds, who were a big field in front. We had found some difficulty with an unavoidable gate. So we made the best of a bad job, both of us I think not without pleasure, for there was a wild woodland madness in the morning, and settled down to ride by ear over the pearly fences, which loomed suddenly and far more suddenly were gone.

“ When people ask me which was the best hunt I ever had, I tell them it was the fog day from Ribston Wood. I suppose it may have been dangerous, and was certainly unorthodox ; at the same time we never saw the hounds over a point of nine miles—following them with blind luck by their music alone, and by Young Tommy's knowledge of the country—and so I suppose that a purist would object that it wasn't a hunt at all. But I was younger in those days and something in the air had

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sent me silly. The Slocdolagers had the sense to mount their whips well. I was riding a chestnut six-year-old who took to it with the same sort of furious levity which was in my own heart, and who needed holding rather than kicking at the ghostly rails. Ghostly is the word that I must emphasise now. There was the joy of life and the sense of importance, and the truce to care : but all this was going on in a universe that was different. I might have been Gabriel hunting Asmodeus over the plains of heaven, or a witch floating on a broomstick between the mountains of the moon. I was an unbodied spirit on a bodiless horse. He was a horse with a remarkably smooth action, and he sailed over his fences with a movement which seemed scarcely to rise. All this, combined with the fact that I hadn't the vaguest notion where we were, contributed towards giving me a feeling of separation. I was not in the world any more, but in the fog, and anything that was beautiful might happen in that impalpable universe.

“ The beautiful did happen. There were three of us instead of two. How she arrived it was impossible to say. No human being who had been with the rest of the field in the valley could possibly have caught us up, and, besides, I did not remember seeing her among the twenty at the covert-side. I landed at a drop fence and heard somebody land behind me. It was a woman riding side-saddle in a tall hat, and she had taken the fence at my place.

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The next fence we took abreast ; and I could see her smile.

“ That she should be the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, seemed the natural thing. She was not young, or at least not childish, but she was love and peace itself. She was riding superbly as if she were unconscious of the country which she crossed. I can't explain to you how she was the spirit of the hunt, and how that spirit was one of comfort. Nor can I tell you what an agony of deprivation she left behind her when she left. We had a kind of check after another twenty minutes, the hounds having presumably run over the line and been brought to the necessity of casting themselves alone. We sat on our steaming horses in the deep silence, and pricked our ears like theirs. Curiously, I had not the least desire to speak to the lady. I did have a desire to stand my horse near hers. But she went as suddenly as she had come. She said, ‘ I live here. Good-night,’ and in ten seconds the fog was as empty as it had been before.

“ In a minute the hounds were away again on a full chorus, and I had to go with them. I kept hoping that the strange lady would have heard them and rejoined, but I hoped in vain. The pace, very soon, was too good to enquire. I had forgotten all about her by three o'clock. It was at that time that I went into Caingey Thornton's brook. Young Tom knew it was coming and spoke to me, but I misunderstood what he said. I did not see it

till it was too late to put on the steam that my tired horse wanted ; and it was very cold and green.

“ The horse came out on the Sponge side and I came out on the other. I didn’t relish swimming across to fetch him. So then there was a goodish walk to find the friendly bridge that the old huntsman had used on a previous occasion, and after that I couldn’t find the horse. I searched for him for half an hour with no success, having got his hoof marks muddled up with Young Tom’s, and found the bridge about twice. After that the fog became really terrible and I realised that I was just as lost as the horse was. I stood still, but the world was as silent as if it had died. I took off my spurs and began to walk about, looking for the bridge road. No doubt I should have found it if I hadn’t looked for it, but as it was I couldn’t find a road of any description. By four o’clock I was faced with either sitting down in a ploughed field or walking somewhere. The fog was reaching the pitch of the London variety, and I had been given to understand that lost people walked in circles. However, it seemed better to walk in circles than to freeze ; so I lay on my back and flourished my legs, to get rid of the last of Caingey’s brook, and then I started walking.

“ The same voice that I had last heard saying Good-night, said, as if there had been no gap in the conversation, ‘ You had better come in and get

dry.' It was then six o'clock, and the lady of the top hat, though she was now dressed in a tea gown, was standing in a cow byre in the most natural way. I have never seen anybody look more beautiful in a byre. She took my hand and walked magically before, leading the way through the tangible darkness. Then there was a low door, and a big hall with the firelight moving over an Adam ceiling, and I could see her plain.

"I suppose I had better give up trying to describe her to you ladies. You will be thinking how she made her face up, or whether she wore her own hair. And to feel that you were thinking that would still hurt me in my inside. She was dark, of course, but that conveys nothing. The point was that she was happy : happy in a way that radiated itself, but not on purpose. Indeed, I should hesitate to say that she was benevolent. She merely glowed with happiness ; as a fire glows with heat, without definitely meaning to warm anybody. She was the South wind in May-night branches, the moonless sea. One felt in her the mysteries of creation, of night and day and the relationships of the galaxies. It was as impersonal as the stars, as lovely and as mysterious. Beside the miracle of her presence it was hardly wonderful to find that the Adam-ceilinged hall was filled by twenty-seven Siamese cats.

"The mere facts of this story are boring in the extreme. The date was 1899 and my hostess did not

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possess a motor. We were still in the days when hunting was earned by hacking. It was decided that I should stay the night, on account of the fog.

"I want to skip as much as I can. It was the feelings that were important, and now the feeling of joy came back to me in full measure, so that I whinnied in my bath. I felt young and naked and deliciously warm, and my toes ached a little as they thawed in the hot water. It was not a modern bath. The whole house was genuinely old-fashioned, and not for that reason in the least bit uncomfortable. My bedroom, for instance, might have had cigars smoked in it by Mr. Sponge. There was the canopy-bed and the tapestry carpet. But my hostess had provided a better bath in it than I have had since that day. There was a roaring fire, which lit the room without the need of candles, and the low tin circle in front of it. And behind that was a bulwark of towel horses draped with warm towels, which kept out the draughts and trapped the radiance of the coals. One didn't mind having only three inches of water, because the air was as warm as the bath was. There were steaming cans to replenish it experimentally, and I, of course, was not a stranger to the best technique. I lay on my back, with my feet on the mantelpiece and a hot sponge on my tummy, watching the smooth firelight dance between my thighs.

"I can tell you nothing about the dinner. There

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were just the two of us, waited on by a butler with pointed ears very high on his head, so that he looked like a cat. I can tell you nothing about it. It was peace, it was beauty, it was a feeling in the midriff like the bodiless dreams one used to have of flying down the stairs.

“ I went to bed early and slept in soft linen that smelt of lavender, on a feather bed. I slept deeply and dreamlessly, to wake up in full consciousness at four o'clock. I don't know whether you have ever woken up in a flush of beauty. I can't describe it to you unless you have experienced it yourself. I woke up feeling absolutely conscious, absolutely alive, absolutely at peace with everything. The muscles of my body and the inclinations of my mind were tuned. I could have heard the grass growing or seen the microbes of my happy blood. Shades of colour would have given me a piercing beauty. Design was at my finger-tips. I was in an ecstasy pitched exactly to the tune of the world. There was a unity and a lack of barrier and a perfect flow. My veins were full of dew.

“ What had woken me was a voice above the eaves, among the twisted chimneys. My room was at the top of the house. The voice said, with exquisite love and modulation, with a stealing sweetness that merged delightfully through all the fibres of the world, with an embracing, caressing, happy, living intonation that was the loving heart of heavenly music :

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“ ‘ *Good-night, dear brother Venom.*’

“ And another voice, ethereal, heart-folding, softly swelling like the dew in my veins, cooed its mysteriously soothing answer :

“ ‘ *Good-night, sweet sister Nightshade.*’

“ I went to sleep again at once.

“ When I woke up, the sun was shining. I hopped out of bed and went to the window. Underneath, on the gravel path, an aged gardener was picking up a besom broom.”

CHAPTER THREE

"What a lovely story!" said Mary.

"Oh, it's very well," said Mr. Sponge, "but I don't believe in spirits."

"It's ould-fashioned," said Mr. Romford.

"Witches aren't spirits," exclaimed the Professor hotly.

"What are they then?"

"Witches," said the Professor.

"Well, oi don't believe in them. Let's have a game of Nap."

Pansy rose to the occasion. "The supernatural," said he, speaking very quickly in order to get ahead of Mr. Romford and his cards, "is the only thing left to-day. We had the petrol engine, and the factory and the armament firms. Everything natural was at the tips of our fingers. And where has nature led us?"

He pointed through the ceiling.

"Nap . . ." began Mr. Romford.

"To that," continued Pansy, quickly retrieving his blunder. "Nature, the mechanised and behaviourist world of matter, betrayed her masters. In the old days we could think and feel and love and exercise our imaginations. Later, we could only get into trains and motor cars and aeroplanes. We could only rush about the surface of the globe, scorning any velocity which rose

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to less than sixty miles an hour, hastening fruitlessly upon unprofitable errands. Look at Jane Austen. In the old days, before nature had gone material, in the days when human beings moved in horse-drawn vehicles, and so had time to think, Jane Austen was read. But who would read her yesterday? What was her air speed, her oil pressure, her maximum revs. per minute? None, absolutely none. And so we didn't read her. Nature, the modern nature, didn't give us time. We had to have something snappy, something full of purple patches, which could be wolfed and thrown away in spare half-hours, in a few minutes even, between our dashes in the Bentley or the Moth.

"Nature," added Pansy desperately, hardly pausing for breath, "was natural in 1803. It was balanced, reasonably leisurely, and suited to homo sapiens. Human beings are made to think and imagine. In the nineteenth century they had time to do so. But with the twentieth century there was time for nothing at all. Only speed, the acme of laziness. Speed saved us from the necessity of being ourselves. Faster motors, quicker crises, swifter bombs. It all went past in a flash, and there was no time to do anything about it at all. Nature had reached her logical conclusion by being, humanly speaking, unnatural: and there was nothing left for the practical universe but to destroy itself with war. I personally shall cheer the supernatural to the echo every time."

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"Fiddle!" said Mr. Romford.

"Stuff!" said Mr. Sponge.

"You young people," said Mr. Romford, suddenly beginning to look like Bernard Shaw, "are past my patience entirely, indeed you are. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a reactionary."

"Nostalgia," said Mr. Sponge, with the erudition of 112 and a precise Victorian accent, "de la boo."

"What is the use," continued Mr. Romford, "of being alive, if you don't live with the times? Maybe the race is becoming less philosophical; maybe it does move at a faster rate. But we belong to it, and it can't move faster than we are capable of following. Evolute, my buoy, evolute."

"Do you suppose," asked Mr. Sponge, "that Facey and I have stuck to horses all our lives?"

"Good God!" exclaimed the Professor. "You don't say . . ."

"We do," said Facey, helping Soapey to a bumper of Madeira. "Soapey here went into aviation, and oi drive in the Bugatti team."

"Rotten cars," said Mr. Sponge.

"Yeah?" said Facey.

"Now, aeroplanes. . . ."

"Hout! There's no comparison."

Pansy interrupted. "I defy you," said he, "to tell a ghost story about a motor car or an aeroplane."

"Why should oi?"

"You can't. That's just it. Deny the supernatural, atrophy the imagination, surrender yourself to the

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revolutions of a camshaft, live, as you call it, with the times : and where are you ? Sitting in a dug-out with the race obliterated and fancy dead. Where is poetry ? Where is the soul ? Up above us, in the shambles."

"Hoity-toity," said Mr. Sponge.

"The boy's right, in a way," said the Countess.

"You can't get much soul out of a motor."

"Nor can you out of a horse."

"Oh ! " exclaimed the Countess, deeply shocked.

"Well, you can't. Know what oi'm talkin' about, don't oi ? All this sentimental twaddle about moorland Mousie, and sich like, makes me sick. What is a horse but a dumb animal, anyway ? It makes me sick. Now, take a Bugatti . . ."

"Ord rot it," interrupted Mr. Sponge enthusiastically. "Take a Fury and go the whole hog. What can a Bugatti do but go fast along the flat ? Even a horse can give an impression of speed. But what horse can do a slow roll ?"

"Bugatti or Fury," said the Professor, "it doesn't matter which. Pansy is right. The machine is dead, and it hasn't got a ghost. Who ever heard of a ghostly Bentley ?"

"Oi did ! " shouted Mr. Romford.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was with the greatest difficulty that he was restrained from telling his story there and then. Nobody had slept since they entered the dug-out, and it was time to face the problem of accommodation. One of the camp beds was already occupied by the dead or dying market-gardener, who was discovered to be wearing an old Etonian tie ; the Countess seemed to have a reasonable claim upon the other. Facey and Soapsey settled down in the leather chairs ; the Professor and Pansy slept with their heads on each other's shoulders, on the sofa ; Mr. Marx and Mary continued to lie on the floor behind the mechanical horse ; Frostyface curled up on sacks and began to snore. When he had snored three times the Professor got up, hung his coat over the canary, switched off the light. The oblong room became void : teeming dark, subterranean, velvet, tangible. It was a deserted mine peopled by badgers, a catacomb for early Christian martyrs. One could only tell that one's eyes were open by the feeling of the muscles. One was sleeping in a bottle of Indian ink. The snores of Frostyface were the single contact with one's fellow men.

They turned some oxygen on before breakfast, and everybody felt better, if frowsy. Then they ate fresh fruit, sweet corn and potted shrimps. After breakfast

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they played poker till luncheon, and after luncheon they played vingt-et-un till dinner. By dinner-time the most secret stores of cash had been discovered and stripped, so that now nobody had any money except Facey and Soapsey. These two offered to open a bank, so that they could lend their winnings out again at five per cent. ; but the market was weak. Dinner was a simple affair of chicken, tinned asparagus, and bread and cheese, washed down with claret wine. After dinner, before anybody had time to protest, Mr. Romford assumed a dogged expression and began to speak :

“ There were two Spurriers, twin brothers, who used to 'unt with the Larkspur until 1931. They came of a hard-ridin' family, which had failed to have too many children in the 'fifties, and remained pretty warm. Their parents spoiled them when they was young, bringing them up in the tradition of Henry Mytton. Indeed, there was some sort of gossip in the county which connected the Spurriers in a left-'anded way with the squire himself. He was said to have known the great-grandmother in Boulogne, during his last days, before he lighted his nightshirt as a cure for the he-cups. Whatever the truth of that may have been, the Spurrier boys were completely ungovernable. They were 'andsome, in a hatchet-faced sort of way, fair-haired and cold-eyed. If anybody ever did, those buoys had sold their souls to the devil. It was not only that they

were reckless—like ould Mytton, they were only afraid of one thing : being afraid—but they were at the same time utterly ruthless, and treated other people with the same impartial cruelty which they gave to themselves. It was not only that the smallest provocation would cause them to leap their 'osses over the spiked railings of the park, nor even that they set themselves systematically to accomplish each of the feats attributed to their supposed great-grandfather. Such things as that might have been the result of 'igh spirits, or devilment, or something equally innocent. But the Spurriers were mad. The essence of madness is the onexpected. Lunatics frighten us because they are outside the normal sequence. When they become actively so they tarrify us as well. Of course, some lunatics are not terrible : oi mean the passive ones who merely believe in themselves and remain inactive. But the active lunatics, the ones who, far from being static, are on the contrary liable to do anything at any moment, these are the scourges that redooce the normal man to terror. The Spurriers were like this. They had a devil of action inside them, as well as a devil of contrariety and a devil of curiosity. Let me illustrate this with a story. Oi expect you have, at one time or another, twisted your sister's arm. A point is reached, you will remember, when the poor girl claims that the limb is going to break. One then has an internal struggle during which one wonders whether this is true. One gives the

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member a little further turn, and stops, horrified at the imaginary possibility. John Spurrier once dislocated his brother Peter's arm, to see whether it would happen. Peter, of course, never winked an eyelid. Only, about six weeks later, he stabbed his brother in the back with a penknife, and laid him up for four months.

"Oi need hardly say that the twins hated each other like poison. The boys were always in the first flight of the Larkspur. They made a point of ridin' at anything that seemed impossible. They were magnificent horsemen, had schooled their 'osses over wire, and had broken most of the bones in their bodies. They invariably rode to cut each other down and used to have stand-up foights with any weapons that came handy, rakes, fists, pokers or dinner knives, about once a month. Naturally enough the hatred was akin to love. They were all-in-all to each other in their queer way. When they were not trying to take each other's lives, they were as thick as thieves. They loved each other like David and Jonathan ; but it was the crazy passion of a homicidal David and an incestuous Jonathan. There was something of the poet Byron and Augusta in it, something of that classical feller, Oedipus, or Shakespeare's Hamlet, or King Lear.

"We normal subscribers quailed before the satanic pair, and 'ad good reason to do so. They took a cruel pleasure in practical jokes, the basic assumption on which they founded them being that

everybody else was as Spartan as themselves. They feared nothing, suffered everything, and expected the same qualities from others. So, if Peter got drunk after dinner, you might expect to have a red-hot poker laid gently across your knee, or if John's eyes looked woildly sarcastic he had locked his mother in the refrigerator. There was the business over the Countess of Caperington, which ye may remember, since it got a certain amount of onfortunate publicity. She was cruising with them on their yacht, and they got drunk in the channel. The boys forced all hands to take to the boats, including their mother, but not including the countess. She was picked up fourteen hours later, derelict and hysterical, by Lord St. Empire, the Press Baron who afterwards married her.

“ Oi knew them well, and always remained, like their other acquaintances, divided between fear and admiration. There was something clean and almost beautiful about their physical skill. And yet they were bounders. They had not an hatom of courtesy or humanity or toleration. They were cads in the huntin' field, and to women, and to anybody weaker than themselves. They would have robbed a blind beggar or soaked a pussy-cat in paraffin and lighted it. At the same time they preserved a purely snobbish code of honour about onessentials, such as fishing solely with the dry fly, to which they adhered with a contemptuous ferocity worthy of a better cause. They would suddenly make up their minds

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that so-and-so was not out of the top drawer, and systematically would set about making his life a burden to him, until he was generally thankful to sell his house and clear out of the county.

“ The rivalry between the Spurriers was accentuated when they fell in love with the same gel. Each of them had by now acquired an equal number of steeple-chasers, a Bentley and an aeroplane. They rode, drove, or flew with equal skill ; and it became the question which of the two would get the gel. Relations were broken off, so that it looked as though the monthly quarrel would this time end in murder. The only thing was that they were both fond of being aloive and did not propose to be ’anged. They sat down coolly to think out schemes for killing each other, without having to take the consequences. It was no longer a question of foul ridin’ in steeple-chases, or onything of that sort : it was a question of premeditated and careful slaughter. They had got to kill each other clean. A bungled affair, with a broken limb instead of a broken neck, would be wuss than useless.

“ The bloody business brewed up, naturally enough, during a frost. For three weeks the meets had to be cancelled and the brothers skated sullenly on the grey ice, or waited for the duck at dawn and sunset where there was running water. There was no sudden thaw. The temperature rose imperceptibly. The Master of the Larkspur is a keen man and took his ’ounds out at the first oppoortoonity, whilst

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the ice was still brown on the lakes at Beldon Hall. The brothers came out on the same day.

“ Peter was ridin’ a troublesome ’oss that had not been made any more docile by the weeks in stable. He sent him with the groom to a place about a mile from Beldon, partly with the idea of having a secluded place to mount him in the event of ’is proving fractious, partly with the idea of coming to terms with him before the actual meet. John was riding a quiet ’oss, which he sent over the whole way, and was to follow in the Bentley. Peter started first. He had covered a quarter of a mile on the mettlesome steed when he heard John’s car behind him. It was a brown Bentley with four hooters, including a siren.

“ When John saw Peter in front of him, the ’oss was walking sideways along the road. Both boys had been drinkin’, on account of the frost and the gel and the general situation. John changed down two gears, accelerated until he was making the loudest possible noise, and, when he was about ten yards behind his brother, blew the siren with as many hooters as he could cover. The ’oss stood up on each end, took two and a half leaps, and came down sideways on the tarmac with its hoofs flashing in the air. You know the sideways motion of the offside legs, and the crash and the pain. Peter was flat on the road, with his right leg under the saddle. John accelerated and ran over him slowly, taking both his near wheels across his brother’s chest. It

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was said by the country people, where the story is beginning to be a legend, that Peter spoke to him through the floorboards of the car.

“In ony case, the next groom to happen along the road, which was a lonely one, found the brothers together. The ’oss had got to its feet unhurt, and had cleared off back to the stable. John had dragged his brother to the bank at the side of the road and propped him up against the hedge. He was kneelin’ in front of him, and the two were starin’ each other out, eye to eye. Peter’s eyes died, but never closed : he did not speak again.

“John ’unted as if nothing had happened. He never afterwards referred to his brother, except at the coroner’s quest, where he explained that it had been unpossible to draw up in time. But a queer thing was that he took no further interest in the girl ; and another thing was that he began drinkin’ more heavily than ever. Also, he began to ride badly. The people in the second floight, in which he was now riding as often as not, used to see him pulling his ’oss suddenly at fences. He appeared to change his mind at the last moment and swerve, and try to go over a few yards to the left or roight. Of course, this was scarcely fair on the ’oss and he used to get refusals ; and then he would swear in a bitter way, quite unlike the usual ’untin’ oaths, which are generally fifty per cent. fright. Not that I mean to imply that John wasn’t afraid. It would be truer to say that he was tarrified. After about six weeks of

this he began to come out tipsy, and the spirits loosened his tongue. People used to hear him talking to himself, or at any rate talking, with his head turned slightly sideways as if he were speaking to his shoulder. It sounded like a sort of runnin' commentary, mixed with expostulations and defiance. It would rise to an eerie crescendo as he went at his fences, and then he would swerve and refuse, and curse in his soft terrific way. In the evenings he would lock himself in the dinin'-room with his port, and talk away for hours to nobody. He used to throw decanters about, and once broke both the french windows by firing a shot-gun straight down the table.

"Although he appeared to have lost his nerve entirely, and although he seemed to be practically mad, he insisted on doin' everything which he had been accustomed to do before. He still hunted four days a week, and drove his Bentley and flew his aeroplane. He went as usual to the hunt ball.

"Oi was there too, and got a first-hand account of his death. It appears that he took to the champagne almost at once, and was heard offering to fight Tony Pyefinche with any weapon, or to race him on or in any vehicle, alive or dead, over a course to be selected at random. Tony Pyefinche wisely escaped by offering him another drink, and the challenge was then extended to all comers. John immejitly began to behave like a ventriloquist without a dummy. He said to his left shoulder that

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he was not afraid of him or of any man, that he would certainly race him in the Bentley from there to Tarring Neville and back again, leaving their hats on the front steps to show they had been there. He said that he was perfectly ready to start at once, and that each driver should select his route accordin' to fancy. The important thing was to leave their hats at Tarring Neville, and the first man home to be the winner. With that he took another draught of champagne, broke the glass on the floor, and stamped off to find the car. Some of the bystanders were frightened and wondered whether they ought to do something about it. Tony volunteered to follow him up if he could. But before they could find his car, in the muddle of Lalique radiator lights and amateur point-duty-men behind the stables, the Bentley engine started up, like 'ounds scoring to cry, and swept away into the darkness with a chiming crescendo of detonations.

“He was heard roaring past Dalberry Lees at about five past one ; but there was no very clear accounts of that. A policeman at Hickington actually witnessed the accident. He said that he heard the car coming along the Dalberry road at a terrific pace, when it was more than a mile away. The headlights swept over the ridge among the trees, and burrowed through the night like a train under its lighted steam. When he first saw the car itself it was being driven on the wrong side of the

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road ; so the Hickington policeman retreated as it came up to him, because of the daze of the headlights. But the moment it was past he could see John Spurrier in silhouette, and the boy was leaning across from the driver's seat, shouting to the near side of the car. He was on the wrong camber of the road, with his foot hard down, on a moighty curve. He cried out distinctly, 'Damn you, give me a bit of room ! Damn you, keep to your own side of the road !' And then the car went through a telegraph post as if it had been butter, climbed up the policeman's bank about fifty yards farther down, and turned over in the ditch.

"There was a shining hat at Tarring Neville."

CHAPTER FIVE

"A poor, mechanical sort of story," said the Professor.

"Now mine had obliquity, as well as point."

Mr. Romford, instead of flaring up, said humbly, "O! only invented it, you know."

"There," said the Countess. "I think it was a very clever story indeed."

"You should have left the hat to the imagination," said Pansy.

"But it shone."

"Do you mean it gave out light?"

"Yes. A sort of black light; like a cat purring."

"Why do ghost stories," asked the Professor, "have to aim at horrible effects? Look at Monty James, for instance. Delightful fellow as he is, and practically the only educated man who writes that type of story, I can't help finding an effort to creep the flesh. I can feel the mechanism creak and the mind selecting. I can feel him casting about for something horrible, and dressing it up with reticence, so as to give the maximum thrill. There is the conscious mind behind it all, saying, Is this horrible? And adding, How can I put it best? I get tired of horrors. I don't mean that I don't like them. I mean that they begin to cloy. It is like the sense of smell, which vanishes under prolonged stimulation. Gibbets, corpses and cathedrals: ulti-

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mately they lose their effect. Besides, why should a ghost be horrible?"

"Or if horrible," said Pansy intelligently, "why by simple means like horror? A formless hairy creature, with red eyes, is a primitive engine for giving a fright. One might as well revert to the turnip."

"Why," pursued the Professor, "should ghosts always want to give a fright? Why can't there be a lovely ghost, or a happy ghost, or an absent-minded ghost, or something like that? One could invent a nice story about the ghost of a schoolmaster, a poor grey creature wandering about the dormitories looking for bits of string."

"The boys would get accustomed to him," said Pansy, "after a bit. They would begin to rag him all over again. Oh, sir, they would exclaim in unison, we think Jones minor has swallowed a mouse. . . ."

"Or a ghost," added the Professor, "who had died for love. You know the sensation. I daresay you have been in love yourself. That unutterably loathsome heightening of everything, so that one is half a ghost or god already. In any case no longer human, no longer an inhabitant of the crawling world. I can imagine a love-ghost of such frightful pathos that it would be more terrible than anything in Monty James."

"I have met one," said Mr. Sponge.

"You must tell us about it," said the Professor politely.

"To-morrow night," added the Countess.

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Mr. Sponge inserted two fingers between the middle buttons of his coat and bowed with dignity.

"In an aeroplane, I suppose," said Pansy nastily.

"Of course."

"That's mendacious," remarked Mr. Romford, "if you loike."

"You're more likely to get a ghost in an aeroplane than in a *passé* motor," retorted Soapey, "let me tell you."

"More likely to become one, you mean."

"That's all my eye."

The Professor said, "By referring to the motor car as *passé*, and therefore unliable to contain a ghost, you undermine my cherished beliefs about the supernatural. Do ghosts really have to be up-to-date? When I was a boy we used to find them only in the moated grange."

"Oh, no," said Soapey. "You can find them anywhere. I only meant that the aeroplane was more likely than the motor. It is more airy, more supernatural in itself. You see, it is not earth-bound."

"More sensitive, oi suppose," sneered Mr. Romford. "More oi-theerial."

"Yes, I do suppose," said Mr. Sponge. "But it's no good tellin' the story."

"Oh, come," cried the Professor. "Don't allow yourself to be put off by a squabble."

Mr. Sponge retorted angrily, "I'm not put off. No gen'lman would refuse at this stage. Only it's no good tellin' you because you would not understand."

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"Thank 'ee," said Mr. Romford, with ponderous sarcasm.

"It isn't that," pursued Mr. Sponge, turning a desperate eye in all directions. "I don't mean to offend the party. Very good party, I'm sure. But how would you understand it all? It's the air, you see. And I haven't got the gift. It's the air, the feeling. You can't explain it unless you have it. If an aeroplane means nothing, neether will my ghost."

"We could try to understand," said the Professor humbly.

This made Soapey angrier than ever. "It is not you," he said, "who have to try. It is me. I have to try to explain."

"That," said Pansy, "I can well believe. A ghost in an aeroplane is bad enough, but a love-ghost into the bargain! Love, ghosts and aeroplanes: no.

"No," added Pansy. "Not at all."

"Let me tell you," said Mr. Sponge, "that there have been many ghosts in aeroplanes. But a puppy wouldn't know."

"For instance?"

"For instance there was Brian Dickens: was in my squadron in the War."

("Soapey gave his age as 27," explained Mr. Romford. "Ended up an Air-Marshal, oi believe. Another name, o' course.")

"At ten thousand feet in a Camel, he found himself sitting on someone else. He jumped out."

"How do you know?"

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"Was one of the parachutes that worked."

"It must have been an odd feeling," said the Countess.

"Odd!" exclaimed Mr. Sponge. "How can I tell you my story when you do not know? At ten thousand feet, and the roads were little lines like maps. It was the evening. There were clouds. He was alone."

Mr. Sponge got his second wind and started again with a rush. His vocabulary began to expand.

"The clouds come at you fast. They are monsters : rushing and menacing close to. It is only the going in. Inside and out they are unimportant. But going in. And it is only a bundle of sticks and rags : a heavy, precarious contraption. Lift and drift and drag, what is all that but words? He was a lonely boy, nervous with war. The roads were little lines. The clouds were horrors in the thin air. He was cut off from men. Suppose a wing dropped off? Why should not it? It would take long to fall. Oh, he said to himself, be good, beware, be careful! Eagles are said to be proud and contemptuous with their height. But no, they know their insignificance. This boy at ten thousand feet was among the cloud-gods, miles beyond the aid of earth. He must be humble with them, commit no pride against their power. He must fly nothing but straight and level. No sudden stresses on those precarious, those precious wings : no diving out of it even. Only a gentle, a humble glide : a cautious, im-

perceptible withdrawal towards the friendly earth. He could feel the weight of his own body weighing on the seat, the seat in turn weighing on the weightless air. He felt that he was going to stall. Why did not he fall out (and that long fall !), out of this empty air, from between the crumpling jerry-built wings? Sticks and boxes ! And then he was sitting on a thing that moved. The stick came back malevolently, of its own volition. The A.S.I. began to drop. The nose, weak, gasping for air, pointed upwards in a death-throe. He was going to be spun.

“ Then,” continued Mr. Sponge, “ there was J. J. Crowdey, a great-grandson of old Jog. It was a funny thing that the gibbey sticks should have made money after all. There was a craze for them in 1910, and the Crowdeys got fabulous prices for the originals. Ultimately they started a factory and cleared half a million in America. They were a queer family, a bit pompous and asthmatical. J. J. Crowdey bought himself a Gipsy III in 1934, which he was very proud of. He used to take his guests to see it in the private hangar, first thing, and talk away about his flights to Deauville and Le Zoute as if they were ocean crossings at the least. He was a fussy youth. It used to take him half an hour to get unstuck, testing everything twice and puffing like a grampus. He would not be hurried, and liked things to be just so. Well, one day he was flying from Lympne to Heston. He got away after

the usual botheration, and flew with the railway exactly three hundred yards on his left hand, thinking self-importantly about air-routes and forbidden zones. He had plenty of time, so he decided to go north of Croydon, and miss the traffic. He kept his eye on the port side watching the patterns and scrofulas of the earth; the golf courses like smallpox; the stooked corn like pin-striped cloth; the towns like intricate heaps of bicycle chain, machine-gun belts, piano keyboards, and motor tyre tracks; the low crows, like little aeroplanes with their shadows; fields mown round the edges, like fancy pocket handkerchiefs; cemeteries like tiny jumbles of toothpicks and spillikins. He was within sight of the more gothic piqué regularity of London, which stretched its pelt round the white dentelles of Tower Bridge like a gargantuan armadillo or horned toad, when he happened to glance over his right shoulder. His first reaction was of startled anger and surprise. A Klemm had crept up behind him unobserved, and was flying in formation, almost wing to wing. He was not amused. The shock turned into fussy rage, so that he wanted to report the man for dangerous flying, and wondered where he could lodge the protest. It was disgraceful. He supposed the fellow thought it was a joke. J. J. Crowdey looked at the Klemm again, with an angry glare. He was surprised to see, and at first hardly more than surprised, that there was nobody in either cockpit.

“When he eventually landed,” concluded Mr. Sponge, “he was at Sywell Aerodrome. It had flown with him, wing to wing and equidistant, through a series of frantic aerobatics which would have been dazzling at Hendon. Over Northampton it was gone. He came in to Sywell like a hunted deer, flying low, with his head over his shoulder. He made no circuit and no allowance for wind. The nearest point of the aerodrome was Home, and that was all he cared. As it happened the wind was in the east and pretty strong. He scraped in over the hedge with a lot of drift ; flew straight into the ground on his port wheel and wing. The undercarriage shut up like a pack of cards, the fuselage turned over on its left side, the wings sat down on top of him like dough. It was a crumple, not a crash. The flying thing was suddenly stationary and mute. Tommy Rose ran like a stag. He had the safety belt off in a flash, like a gillie gaffing a salmon, just before the flames began. Then, with Crowdey babbling incoherently on the grass, the ground staff and the engine stood by to watch the orange fire lapping lazily about the wreckage, and the black smoke curling viscously towards the sky.

“Crowdey,” added Mr. Sponge, “is in a private lunatic asylum at Reigate ; along with the man who met himself last summer, in the fuselage of a Heyford bomber over Salisbury Plain, face to face.”

CHAPTER SIX

"How long will this war last," asked the Countess angrily, as she got ready for bed, "and what will be the end of it?"

"With extra mouths to feed," said Mr. Sponge, "we've got food here for ten days. After that we'll have to start the world again."

"Like the Ark."

There was another silence ; in the middle of which the bombs began again, like tropical thunder. It was like being in a shelter on a golf course ; whilst the rain roared on the corrugated roof, and the greens vanished in a mist of milk, and the red flags hung their heads like despairing bathing dresses. The noise was muffled. It was the second flight, bringing the poisons. They came low, skimming over the trees and hedges, a roaring phalanx immune from anti-aircraft fire. Those who had been evicted from their buildings by the thermit and the high explosives were now to be gassed invisibly in the streets ; and those who had crept into hidey holes and basements were to be followed down their steps by heavy, coiling, imperceptible fingers. These would send them blind and possibly lunatic ; or cover them with blisters, so that they died screaming ; or merely dissolve the tissues of their lungs, so that they drowned in their own blood. The screams from the distant

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survivors at Beding, and those of the maddened animals in the field above, were inaudible to the survivors beneath the aluminium lid: even weaker than the mewling of tiny kittens. The noise of the explosions was toned down to a kind of concussion in the streaky walls: to mysterious and subterranean tremors, like the noises when one's ears are under water in a bath. The gas did not come through. Only, as Mary thought of it, the membranes of her nose began to twitch and wrinkle.

"Damn them," exclaimed the Professor.

"Is it sporting," asked Pansy, "to run away and hide in a hole?"

"Do ye call that sport?" demanded Mr. Romford furiously, pointing upwards through the roof. He began to take off his coat as usual.

It was at this critical moment that the market-gardener gave a groan.

"Bless me," said the Professor. "I'd forgotten all about him."

"Do ye call that sport?" repeated Mr. Romford, rolling up his sleeves.

"No," said Pansy hurriedly, "I don't. I was asking."

"Do you want a foight?" inquired Mr. Romford.

"No," said Pansy positively. "Not at all."

"Well, then."

"Give him some brandy," said the Countess.

"Oi don't want any brandy," said Mr. Romford.

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"Not you," said the Countess. "This gardener here."

"Give the feller some gin," said Mr. Sponge.

"Wait a bit," said the Professor. "I probably fractured his skull. I'm not sure whether gin is good for that."

"Sure it is," said Facey. "Good for anything."

They gave him half a bottle.

"Give him some air," said Mary. "He's coming round."

"Undo his collar."

"I like his old Etonian tie."

"Good God," said the Professor. "I know the man."

"'Ow are yer?" asked the old Etonian, sitting up suddenly amongst his benefactors.

"How are you?" replied Mr. Marx politely.

"Aow," said the Etonian, and lay down, closing his eyes.

Then he sat up again like a jack-in-the-box, and remarked, "Gentlemen all, good-night." He lay down, apparently dead; but immediately opened one eye and pithily added, "Hats off to Lady Houston."

"Who is this man?" asked Pansy.

"God knows," said the Professor piously. "I met him last week in a pub. He then claimed to be an ex-schoolmaster who had sold his soul to the devil, and was travelling commercially in wheel barrows. He now seems to have taken up market-gardening."

"I'm afraid he's dead," said the Countess.

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"Never mind," said Mr. Romford. "There's too many of us already." He glanced anxiously at the bar, and then added in a gloomy voice, "But it's probably only concussion."

CHAPTER SEVEN

On the third day they had tinned lobster à l'Americaine for dinner, after playing whisky poker for love all the afternoon. Nobody would borrow from the Sponge-Romford bank, and a movement in favour of I-spy-with-my-little-eye was defeated by a heavy majority. By the end of dessert, even the less literary members of the party were prepared to listen with relief. Mr. Sponge had been nervous since breakfast, and now protested that he was not a story-telling man. Almost at the same moment he began to speak, his voice clipping along precisely, with a Victorian efficiency :

“Once upon a time,” began Mr. Sponge.
“Rot it, you can’t begin like that.

“Suicide,” said Mr. Sponge, suddenly beginning to talk from his full age, “is a thing which many people talk about, but few people understand. When I was a boy we used to call it the Coward’s Way Out, regardless of the fact that none of us were brave enough to commit it. I soon saw through that. But the point is that it is not the brave solution either. Cowardice and bravery don’t bear on the subject at all. For suicide is a thing that happens, without any relationship to reason.

“I had reached my ninety-fourth year before the

matter cleared itself up. Even when I was seventy I had realised that suicide was the only course of action open to a reasonable human being. Why worry to go on living? It was an obvious waste of time and energy. I was sick, as the man said in the note which he left behind him when he jumped off Beachy Head, of all this buttoning and unbuttoning. Yet I continued to live.

"Well, when I was ninety-three I joined the R.F.C. At that time I could see no object in going on being alive. Don't think that I am making complaints. My life had not been specially unhappy; in fact the reverse. But one can't help scraping up some wisdom in ninety years, and life seemed unwise. When I joined the R.F.C. I did so without any reasons for not getting killed. I was not brave enough (I still used the word 'brave') to kill myself, and I thought I hoped that somebody might do it for me. Intellectually it did not seem to matter.

"I would recommend a solo flight to all prospective suicides. Now (I had thought to myself when mine was still a few hours off) if I kill myself I do, and it makes no odds. I had reckoned without the will to live: without the little man inside me.

"Some of your analytical amateurs seem to think that one can traffic with the subconscious, even control it. But the curious thing about the matter is that you can't. The man upstairs, who went by the name of Sponge, said that it would be a good

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thing to be dead. The man inside, who went by no name and had never shown himself to the world, said nothing at all. He did not even speak to Sponge. Only, and imperceptibly, he had his silent way. He pervaded me, in defiance of reason. He closed his hands about my heart. I could not detect his hands to pull them off, nor reason with him, for he did not speak. He was not articulate. He probably did not understand the English tongue. It was extraordinary to find oneself in the grip of something which one could not detect : to feel one's life dictated from within. Dumb, foreign, intangible, insusceptible to reason, the libido of Sponge declared for life. It would have been literally impossible to kill myself by an act of will. Courage and cowardice did not affect the question : it was one of lack of communication, like stopping a puller without reins.

“ That is why people don't commit suicide, and why people do. The little man is independent, living a life of his own, beyond control. I think sometimes he dies or goes. You can't kill him, or poison him, or affect him in any way : but he goes sometimes of his own accord. Then you get out of bed and walk through the window ; not with heroics, not with reasons, not even probably with very much emotion. He has taken these things with him, and you follow him out. Committing suicide is probably much like taking off one's boots.

“ I do not mean that some suicides are not

accompanied by struggles. Many of them are ; but these are the suicides which are really accidental. An emotional maniac may put his head in the gas-oven in a theatrical way, to see what it is like. He may sit on the window sill to frighten himself with the drop. The little man holds him back, and will continue to do so except for accidents. It does not matter how many letters he has left for the coroner. It is only when, accidentally, the gas has come too fast, or the window sill has turned vertiginous, that the tragedy occurs. Then, with an anguished inarticulate shriek, welling from the small interior lips that do not speak in English, the unhappy partners plunge together, through the conservatory roof.

“ These are the minority : the martyrs to science who have died because their experiments went too far. The genuine self-murderer does so without a scream. He sits down possibly, deserted by his better half, to write one of those tired and tedious letters which one reads about in the Press. He is a man without vitality, and that is why he writes so badly. Sometimes he cannot even be bothered to write. Only, sitting down with an apathetic gesture, he begins to take off his boots.

“ Andy Capstan was one of the best people I met, before the war and through it. He was a mad contrarious fellow, never chasing the same hare for two minutes together. That was nice. By all reasonable standards one ought to have disliked

him a good deal. He was utterly selfish, and knew it, and thank goodness he did not say so. He did not care a straw about anybody else. He would let you down as often as he held you up. Thinking it over, I can see practically no reason why anybody should have liked him at all. Yet one did. It was because of his *joie de vivre*, his enthusiasm for life ; because, ultimately speaking, of the little man inside him. I was right in saying that there were no communications between the two. Andy was an anarchist, without an atom of humanity inside his shirt. How much we all are that, I have yet to learn. But he was full of life. There was a kind of decency which shone through him, a lust-light of his little man that dazzled because it was brilliant and alive. We worship life, in the last resort ; and Andy was a living soul.

“ It was a foreign admiration, really, that one had for him ; the kind of admiration that one has for a trout, rosy and resilient. One cannot understand a trout. It is a creature of another species, living in another element, beyond the reach of human sympathy. One cannot have a platonic friendship with a trout. And yet one can admire it ; one can love it in a way. It was the same love that one had for Andy.

“ I am not sure but what this is not the best kind of love, when you come to work it out. Look at it from the point of view of animals. Look at the elderly spinsters in Bournemouth, nursing their

little poms. Their love is the sympathetic kind, the anthropomorphic identity based on a fallacious exchange of souls. Little Peeko, they suppose, is a creature like themselves ; and one, furthermore, who must be subjected to all the bogus humiliations of possessive love. He is not a quadruped who exists by himself, in his own mysterious and beautiful way. The spinsters are the same as the children in the toy-shop. They have got to touch, handle, handsel and personally deflower. Peeko has got to be theirs, and they have got to be Peeko's. They have got to yearn in all the horrible prostrations of unreality ; to believe about their animals what is already incredible in the marriage service about the human race. Peeko is a soul of their soul, spirit of their spirit. They are one flesh. Even if married couples could be proved, by ocular demonstration, to have coalesced like the Siamese twins : even if, at a further flight of unreality, their so-called souls could be identified by occult means in a cemented embrace, like the two halves of a kipper, what would be the advantage ? How humiliating to be a Siamese twin, and how much worse if the one side claimed to possess the other ! For the possessed side it would be degrading, for the possessor a confounded bore. A possessor always has to give in exchange. Peeko looks at me with his adoring eyes, and virtue has gone out of me. He has himself claimed a possession ; the possession of protection, yearning,

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dependance, responsibility. We have degraded each other by the exchange.

“And then take the respectable pet, the grass snake, for instance, or the tortoise. See the former gliding at liberty over the floor, strange, beautiful and unpredicted. His black tongue flickers from the raised head in silurian curiosity ; his beady eye fixes one with an independent stare. He moves as his own self, odd, interesting and undebased. That ironic cleft in his nose, the reserved intelligent humour of the plates about his jaw, these are the manifestations of a free soul. He gives nothing to me emotionally, neither love nor gratitude. Only, if I am very careful, he will give the supreme compliment of thankless trust. He will bear with me for what he gets.

“It was the same with Andy. One could not possess him, yearn over him, depend upon his servitude at all. He took his own courses, regardless of loyalty or sentiment, ingrate and treacherous towards his would-be vanquishers, exploiting everybody to the full extent. A tiresome acquaintance, you would think. But he was fascinating. Not only as the snake is, moving unpredictably through an unexpected world, but also on account of his human fury ; the enthusiasm, the attack, the male virility of his subconscious man. I loved Andy, without sentiment or sympathy, as an equal in a hostile world. I myself, when I was a younger man, had learnt to plow a furrow. We respected each other,

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like boa-constrictors in the Congo basin, and he was my friend.

“ Andy joined the R.F.C. along with me. He was seventeen then, and fresh from Wellington. I suppose that very few of us realise properly the youth of many pilots who fought in France. Boys who in peace time might have been in the fifth forms, with all the helpless pathos of the public schools, were pointing Lewis guns at each other in the upper air. At school they would still have been puzzling about love and God and quadratic equations, deluded over all three by masters who had deluded themselves, and reposing an optimistic confidence in the ability of a pedantic impostor to play the part of St. Paul. Their vivid hopes and fears would have been confined to little velvet hats with tassels, and to the startling cauterisation of their behinds with yellow canes. Now, and at the same age, they were blipping fantastically inefficient aeroplanes, with rotary engines, at peril of their real lives. Now the vulnerability of their bottoms was extended right up the back ; so that they woke up in the middle of the night with a twitching in the spinal column, and thought of Richthofen hanging on their tails. Richthofen’s squadron was of no particular colour. The individual aeroplanes were painted with checks and stripes according to fancy, and there were monsters on the fuselage of each.

“ Andy was shot down twice during the war, and accounted for four himself. Once he was caught

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near home, his tail planes shot to ribbons and a quarter of an inch neatly removed from the tip of his nose. He crashed on the aerodrome. The other time he was over enemy territory, dressed in pyjamas. He spent the rest of the time a prisoner of war.

“ I did not meet him much. We were in different squadrons. The only time I can clearly recollect him as a person was at a mess behind Arras. There was some sort of a gaudy on, and everybody was rather gay. It was that odd blend of war-time gaiety, hysterical and unreal but frightfully appealing ; a tasteless, unballasted gaiety redeemed by its comradeship in misfortune. I did not object to the last war, you know ; not the war in the air. At least one had a mess and a dry bed to come back to, and to a certain extent the better man won. There was a run for one's money. Nowadays an aeroplane is such a lethal weapon that a duel means extinction for both parties, but in the last war one could put one's money on one's own mount.

“ I remember Andy standing against the bar, laughing with a kind of Latin dash. It is an arrested picture of him which stays in my mind. The head was back a little, and the open mouth was full of very white teeth. It made one think of suburban mothers anxiously inculcating hygienic laws. Andy's mother had probably taught him to clean his teeth twice a day. He still did it. He

ought to have been doing it now, faithfully, in a sanitary maternal bathroom, with his pyjama jacket off. His skin would have been as fresh as a baby's, and his shoulders almost immature. I was feeling sentimental, almost on the Rupert Brooke level, when I caught his eye. It was a sudden shock to see it on the boy's face, above the happy laugh. For it was aware, perfectly alert for something which it could not find. The mouth was laughing, but the eye was summing up, and not very happily besides. I think that was typical of Andy. He was extraordinarily easy to get on with for a time, always apparently in the best of spirits. He laughed with you ; and let you down. It was because his eye had fallen upon you above the laugh, summed you up, found you wanting. His little man was looking for something all the time, peeping from the shadows behind the curtained windows of the brain.

“ Andy was drunk. He generally was, if rarely to excess. He was far too selfish, far too strong and self-controlled for that. Drink he controlled, as he controlled everything, to get the best out of it for himself. He managed without the headache.

“ They were talking about chickens. Could a chicken fly ? When you come to think of it, it is a reasonable argument for boys of seventeen. Andy borrowed one from a farm nearby and took it up at once. He threw it out at four hundred, over the aerodrome. It appears that a chicken cannot fly,

whether from obstinacy, hysteria, or structural deformity, I am at a loss to say. This chicken did a few stalls and spins. Then it closed its wings and fell like a stone. I have never seen a flatter chicken. Andy inspected the remains with an untroubled eye. It was not for hens that he was on the search.

“I used to see him occasionally, after the war, generally in odd places. He had looked for a long time younger than his age : now he looked much older. The questing eyes had pouches under them, and the broad grin suffered from a missing tooth. He had ceased to trouble about his appearance. He kept himself just on the border of physical efficiency, never actually fat or broken down, but no longer in training. It looked as if his little man was getting discouraged. It was a slight discouragement. The face was lined and meaner in repose, but still bright in animation. He kept his appetite for life, with its consequent inconsistency. Everything was grist to him. His friends, who were a smaller circle, would find him in the oddest places, perfectly at home. He was always picking up new friends and new ideas, carrying the affection of the former with a rush, until he was tired of them and went. He was a prow, ploughing through seas of acquaintances and leaving them behind him in a wake.

“I came upon him suddenly in the auction shed of a little market town, opposite a cage of poultry, and he did not see me come up. There were two

white leghorns in the cage and he stood opposite it for ten minutes, with his head on one side. The leghorns sat looking at him, eye to eye. Occasionally they tilted their heads at a fresh angle, with a jerk. Their black bright eyes, with orange rims, filmed every now and then with a little flicker. When I greeted him he turned round. 'The great thing about animals,' he said, without preliminaries, 'is that they don't talk.'

"A curious and trivial cameo, but it was in that sort of cameo that Andy used to exist. One would hear of him, here and there : sitting in a road-house near Scotch Corner, at four in the morning, with a bottle of whisky and a concertina ; playing Nap with three publicans in a rowing boat off Flamborough Head ; landing at Hatfield in the middle of the King's Cup and explaining that he was sorry, he did not read the papers ; sleeping peacefully in a cowshed near Llandudno ; hacking home in a scarlet coat, with his reins knotted, reading a Russian grammar. Generally he was half tipsy. My own theory is that he took it as a kind of stimulant, to help him through the lonely marathon endurance race on which he was engaged.

I saw him again in 1932, and was amazed to find a change. He had seemed so likely to get merely more moth-eaten and self-absorbed ; a bore, even. And then suddenly in 1932, he was almost the boy again that I had seen in the bar behind Arras. No, he was more beautiful. His eye had taken fire

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with the rest of his face, so that now the whole thing was a satisfied and benevolent enthusiasm. He had bought himself a false tooth, lost the pouches of his eyes, and, which was the oddest thing of all, he was obviously ready to take trouble for his friends. It was as if he wanted to diffuse his happiness in all directions. I was doubtful at first, because he had always been liable to crazes. He had too often gone on the waterwaggon for a month, or given up smoking or become a vegetarian. I think he used to do it out of boredom, to give himself a change or a shock. This time it was a different business altogether.

"I never could see much in the girl myself, but these things are unaccountable. I don't think that the conscious Andy could have seen much in her either. It was the little man, the direct unreasoning demon that was his motive force through life, who had found what he was looking for. Sally was, to the superficial observer, a somewhat less than normally attractive girl. She was young, for one thing, and that is always a disadvantage. Women are all right when they don't try to be men. By structure illogical and incomprehensible to the masculine mind, they are not, however, actively repulsive if they behave like themselves. One can be as fond of a woman as one can be of a grass-snake or a trout. It is only when they cease to behave like themselves, when they insist upon trying to talk sense, that they convert a simple lack of

contact into regular loathing. Sally was rather inclined to be sensible, at least with me.

Andy brought her to see me in full form. It was almost pathetic, the way he sought for moorings among the friends for whom he had never previously had the least consideration. In one way it seemed almost a confession of failure. But not when you noticed his face. It looked fuller : I don't mean heavier, but fulfilled. It was something that had reached an objective, like a china clipper home after the tea race, or a bullet in the centre of the bull. A certain look of intelligence had vanished, but there was peace instead. It did not matter very much what sort of a girl she was : the important thing was that they fitted. Of that there could be no doubt. Perhaps, in secret with him, she really was a lovely person. Perhaps they brought something out in each other, which was not appreciable to a third party. They were boundlessly happy : infectiously, enormously, with Andy's enthusiasm. Reticence, tact or concealment would have been ridiculous. They spent most of the time wrapped in each other's arms, quite undisturbed by company of any sort. They embraced the company as well. It was a fantastic union, a fruition, an utterly true perfection of something which had been wanting to get itself perfected since the world began.

" There was an obscure disease, named after the benefactor who had discovered it. It was also incur-

able, and horribly painful at the end. They told her that she had been suffering from it for several years.

"How they actually killed themselves, except that they did so, is a matter of conjecture. They lived together for six months. I would have expected them to be tragic months, filled with heart searchings and despair; months like the struggling minutes of trapped animals, in iron teeth, waiting to die. On the contrary, they were blissfully happy. Life is unaccountably strange.

"Andy had started flying again in 1930, and owned a Moth. He kept it at a tiny aerodrome nearby, a private venture run by a couple of retired sergeant-instructors from the R.A.F. He used to fly with Sally every day. Towards the end of the time they began to cut it a bit fine, going off in high winds when nobody else would fly. 'Andy's weather' became a stock remark in the bar, meaning anything particularly dreary and impossible. Three or four glum habitués would be sitting on the high stools, under the pendant model of YZ, and the bored whizz and tinkle of the gambling machines would be almost drowned by the roar of rain outside. The aerodrome would be a sheet of sizzling grey, with the soused wind-stockings making a sorry reiteration of the merits of B.P. The gambling machines would stick, only to be rocked to and fro under an assault of savage blows. John would wipe the glasses. In the middle of it there would be the sudden noise of an

engine overhead, a ridiculous and unexpected shoot-up materialising out of the other noises, and somebody would say, 'I bet that's Andy.' They would get down off their stools and stand at the streaming windows, watching the landing with the curious critical suspension which pilots seem to share. The aeroplane would come in, looking bedraggled and exhausted, and begin to flatten out too soon. The onlookers would simultaneously remark, 'Not there, my child, not there.' As if the pilot had heard them, the nose would drop again by the very faintest fraction as they spoke. There would be another gust of rain, in the heart of which the wheels would be on the ground, running along in a sheet of spray. A wheel landing. The onlookers would watch for the bounce, hoping for it, but unaccountably disappointed. The tail skid would touch gently, shooting up another cloud of milk, and the whole thing would nod three or four times, fore and aft, as it came to rest. In a minute Andy would be in the bar, with his arm round Sally's waist and their helmets glistening with moisture. 'I see you've taken to doing a Burton,' the sergeant-instructor would say ; and Andy, with his white teeth gleaming defiance, would squirt a soda siphon down his neck.

"One day Andy switched off his engine at 400 feet, pulled his cheese-cutter right back. Then he and Sally disconnected their earphones and undid their safety belts. It was a fine day. Those who

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were watching in the bar saw the machine come in at hardly more than fifty miles an hour, an obvious overshoot. She hit the ground about seventy yards from the end of the aerodrome, without flattening out, bounced ten feet, and began to slew. Her next bounce was diagonal, but lower. The third time she was practically sideways on. She swung round on wheel and skid, trailed one wing along the grass, righted herself, ran a few yards ; and stopped dead within a foot of the far hedge, pointing along it. The spectators gave a sarcastic cheer. They waited for Andy to taxi back, without noticing that he had lost his engine. It was only after several minutes that they began to run.

“ Andy and Sally were found that afternoon, in a corn field two enclosures away. The executors sold the aeroplane to the sergeant-instructors for a song. It is the end of the story.

“ It is the end of anything that could rationally be called a story. What remains is only conjecture. Yet it is the reason for which the story exists. All the verifiable and normal part is only an introduction.

“ I suppose Andy's little man had left him. Sally's must have gone first, when she began her pains. They say that the Hua-Hua bird is hatched in pairs. The male has a curved beak, the female a straight one, and they feed each other. When the one dies the other starves to death.

“ The point of my odd theory is that Andy’s little man had parted with him inside the aeroplane. Andy himself died in the cornfield, and that is where his ghost would have been if he had one. Perhaps he had not. On the other hand, perhaps his little man was his ghost all the time : perhaps the explanation of all ghosts lies in the subconscious. That curious, dumb, distinct identity, that pervaded me without discoverable contact when I did my first solo : perhaps it was my ghost, unready to leave. When you come to think of it, it is an interesting possibility. The little man, the life-force, the libido, would be likely to persist much longer than the decaying flesh. And Andy’s vitality was amazing.

“ My explanation is that Andy’s man stepped out inside the aeroplane. The physical Andy went down in cartwheels to the field of corn, no longer powerful, no longer charged with the potency of life. There could have been no haunting in the field. But in the aeroplane there was a power left, a charge, an urge, a much less perishable principle of existence.

“ Why should one want to explain it? In any case there was hardly anything that needed explanation. Only the aeroplane, whose registration letters were RS, seemed after that curiously pervaded. They used her as a school machine. It was not only that she seemed impossible to crash : there were other things, some of them quite

tangible. For instance her cruising speed went up five miles an hour. How on earth could that have come about ? The landings I have seen her do with pupils ! You would have said a hundred times that anything else would have been completely written off. I have seen her take away fifty yards of telephone wire, almost with a lurch. And then there was the happiness inside. The pilot had it, not the passenger. There was an elation which took you, a healthy infiltration which made everything seem brighter and clearer in outline, if you see what I mean. Sometimes one could almost weep for joy ; just looking at the green fields, and a pair of goal posts lying flat for the summer, with one's shadow skimming across. It seemed as if one had doubled one's powers. Perhaps that was why the pupils used to do such terrible landings. They found it impossible to take things seriously, became tipsy with confidence. There was the earth, an emerald jewel squandering exultation. They would fly straight at it with complete insouciance, bounce twenty feet at seventy miles an hour, fail to switch on. The sergeant-instructors used to stare and stare at the undercarriage every morning, but it was never strained.

“ I could go on talking about RS for hours. There was the way she flew, living with such sweet truthfulness under her stick. You could have flown her straight and level, in the dark, without instruments, by the feel of her controls. A bunt is

an unpleasing aerobatic on the whole, but people would do it in her. Also outside spins. She seemed to assure you of them, and to carry you into them on pure enthusiasm. Her wings stayed on ; but not, I am sure, for any mechanical reasons.

“ I am not telling you of my own suspicions. Everybody noticed what I say. The two sergeant-instructors eventually refused to fly her solo except from the front cockpit. They said that they preferred their flying sober. Poor devils, they must have had a hair-raising time with their dual instruction ; sitting uninspired in the front seat, whilst the gay maniacal novices in the back one dived on the deck at eighty miles an hour.

“ It was odd that nobody should have begun to worry. Things that we don't understand usually get a bad name. You would have thought that RS would have begun to earn suspicion and fear, on account of her being uncanny. But she was not uncanny at all. There was no hint of the supernatural, not a trace of imposition from outside, not a touch of anything abnormal at all. She never gave you fear. She even cured it. First soloists in RS used to go off regardless of instructions and do a couple of spins before they came in.

“ Well, well. It was Andy's little man. You will have been thinking that this has a poor claim on being a ghost story. But I have been keeping the end for the last. Now I am on the last stretch of the business, and the hardest to convey. The threads

are so tenuous, so difficult to arrange. There was the lack of communication with the subconscious, the fact that it spoke another language : that in English, like the animals, it was literally dumb. And there was Andy, seventeen years old, dropping a chicken at four hundred feet. And the untroubled conscious eye looking rather vacantly at the body : vacantly, with a subconscious look. There was Andy switching off his engine at four hundred feet, and thinking about what? Possibly something quite irrelevant, as one does when one is taking off one's boots. A subconscious thought, possibly ; the last movement of his parting man. I also flew RS from the front cockpit, and once, forgetfully, with my earphones plugged. I also switched off at four hundred, for the silent glide. The engine's raging died, the airscrew in the new-made silence whickked.

“ A flutter ? A downy struggle of stupidity ? In the back cockpit something *was* ; the essence of an idea, a dim thought-sequence possibly playing with a pun ; but in any case material, a living thought. Of course not verbal. It rustled audibly, or clucked.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The old Etonian suddenly opened both eyes and said distinctly, " Talking of aeroplanes, I 'appen to 'ave been a personal friend of Seedy James." The remark was startlingly à propos, particularly as twenty-four hours had elapsed since anybody had mentioned aeroplanes at all. The company was sitting round, after a restless day lightened by games of Consequences and Beggar-My-Neighbour, waiting for Pansy's story. Pansy, who was still inventing it, was in a state of desperation.

" O. C. D. James," continued the old Etonian, closing his eyes again and breathing heavily through his nose, " was heducated at Arrow and Oxford. His select circle of acquaintances used to call him Ossy, which was short for Otium Cum Dignitate, a play on his initials. 'E was a small man of poor physique, with a gentle disposition and a red nose. The latter was not due to drink, for though he could hold liquor in a very surprising way 'e scarcely touched it ; nor in a noticeable degree to any other intemperance. I believe his sexual feelings were rather romantic than strong, and 'e was shy to the verge of mania. He was so shy that one's first impression was one of brusquerie. In the middle of a difficult conversation he would turn

away sharply to hide the tears of timidity in 'is eyes ; and the person with whom he was arguing would as like as not shuffle from the room, feeling that 'e had been ruthlessly dismissed by a man of superior personality. When you were introduced to him he seemed barely to have the civility to shake your hand ; as a fact, he was sometimes afraid to do so."

"What agonies shy men must suffer," continued the old Etonian, "I suppose we seldom realise. Poor Ossy was quite an intimate of mine, and when his tongue was loosed he would talk for hours about 'is troubles. At school he used to pray fervently all through the magnificat and the first lesson that the second lesson should make no mention of St. James. If it did he used to begin to blush. Only gentlemen who are really good blushers will be able to appreciate this. Why, as age and sin give us occasion for it do we lose the faculty, and where innocence and youth should free us from its burden do we most subtly suffer all the throes of a too facile circulation ? "

"*Why, indeed ?*" said the Professor.

"Sir Launcelot must have got out of the habit before he reached middle-age, whereas I daresay Sir Galahad turned a deep beetroot when he saw the Holy Grail. It probably reminded him of a *pot-de-chambre*."

The Professor instantly poured him a tumbler of whisky.

“No doubt,” continued the narrator, “the whole thing is susceptible of scientific explanation, all quite heasy in a psychological and biological way. But there is something else in the subject deserving of more than formulæ: something, one might almost say, poetical and fragile beyond the grasp of mere science. How and with what premotions the blush begins! With what delicate colouring, tulip and crocus quite outmatched, and with what stealthy marches inexorably proceeding, does it climb the countenance through positive, comparative and superlative! It is gentle at first, insinuating and imperceptible; in its wearer’s breast raising wild and quite unfounded hopes that its progression may be checked. How fiercely, how inwardly Laocoon, does he writhe and tussle with the future, holding his breath, counting sheep, repeating poems, and trying to think of something else. But in vain. It rises to condemn him. It is Banquo; it is the Lord’s finger writing upon the wall. Ultimately it is the Last Judgment and ’Ell Fire, with Dives in ’is purple, burning, burning.

“James used to suffer from the eeday fix that the whole chapel was looking at him during the epistle. It was not ’is only horror. Trains especially, for he must have been mocked at a susceptible age by a more than usually contemptuous porter, filled

him with a wild terror. 'E never bought a ticket but was so careful to conceal it in a safe place that he lost it. Then he would stand up in the middle of the carriage whilst the other travellers grinned, and search for it before a bored and sneering collector. 'E would take his coat off, and unbutton his waistcoat, and stand on his hat, and drop 'is bag so that everything fell out. After the train had been held up for five minutes he would give his address, with tears in 'is eyes, and sit down among the relics of 'is packing and costume. When they were well away from the station 'e would put his hands in his pockets and draw out the ticket at the first dip. He used to pray a good deal when 'e was young—before railway journeys, before going to chapel (it was an agony even to walk down the aisle, between those six hundred burning pairs of eyes), before batting at cricket and so on. He was not good at games, wore spectacles, and used to be able to miss the ball in a rather odd way. The boys all called him Old Seedy, again a play on 'is initials.

“The result of all this was to drive James into 'imself. He was born shy, and 'e become reserved. From quite an early age he was driven to find interests within himself. One of the first of them was the cultivation of a thumbnail, which he began to let grow about two weeks from the beginning of the summer term in 1891. 'E managed to keep it going till the holidays, but his father made him cut it off. 'Is father was a clergyman in Leaming-

ton, who believed that the world was going to end on May the 29th, 1928. This made him rather unsympathetic, and he carried his strictness with his children perhaps a little too far. However, the old man died in 1925, secure in his faith, so that so far as he himself was concerned his tenets did no 'arm.

"When the thumbnail interest had been quashed James cast about for several years without an anchor. At Oxford 'e discovered that even if he were unable to play cricket 'e could blow smoke rings with the rowdiest set. This heartened him so much that he made friends with five or six people, and by their agency was inducted into many mysteries. It was at Oxford, blowing smoke rings among his cronies, that 'e first heard of architecture. He became interested, and went on a walking tour with M. G. Roberts, in the course of which they took notes on the Romanesque influence. From that moment Ossy never looked back. He was still as shy as ever, still reserved and painfully unable to establish contact with his species, but he had a wife. 'E was wedded to architecture. His spare time was enormous, since he was too shy to take his recreation with the congeries, and in it he pursued his private lust. His school life had been a martyrdom, and martyrdom, I always think, is the best school for catholicism. From the very start 'is taste was Catholic. He began by despising the Elizabethans and

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devoted his 'ole time to Wren and Jones. Slowly he became more tolerant. He come round to a liking for the Gothic, so long as it was pure. He found that he could like anything, given this corollary.

"I wish I could find words to express," said the Etonian, nodding his proboscis to the Professor over his tumbler, "the accumulation of 'is passion. He was shy, he had a red nose, he had never been encouraged. But inside him there was something he could turn to. When he had made a floater, even when he was going to blush, 'e could think about architecture. The horrors of the world dissolved before a Canaletto. Woman's tender care is said to be seldom fallible towards the child she bears. Drug fiends are said to be capable of any crime to achieve their debauches. How much more so was James attentive to 'is only offspring, wrapped up in the only narcotic which could keep 'is hell at bay ! It all accumulated inside him in secrecy and silence. 'E treasured his little swaddling against the tormentors, eyed furtively all attempts to draw 'im out upon the subject. In a mysterious peace the little newcomer nestled in the womb. All through the 'orrors of the war it remained dormant, and only popped out its head in 1920, the year which found James settled in Coram Street.

"He had a little flat which spoke worlds about its owner. James was described in the police court as being of independent means, but 'is means were not great enough to allow of his possessing the

genuine Old Master. So the flat in Coram Street was decorated with reproductions by the Medici Society. Its characteristic was an absolute lack of anything which might show signs of loudness or bad taste. The result was that it 'ad no characteristics at all. The carpet was a plain matting, the walls were a plain paper. The chairs were blue, but the curtains were biscuit and the carpet was grey. This prevented any imputation of 'aving tried to keep a colour scheme. Nobody entering that room could have suspected anything about its owner. That was what James wanted. 'E was becoming more and more secretive, more and more turned inwards upon his passion.

"He used to walk into Southampton Row and catch a 'bus for the Country Life Offices in Covent Gardens every morning at half-past nine. One day a week he used to spend in the British Museum. He used to come home at five o'clock and spend the evenings reading. Sometimes 'e used to pay a formal call upon one of his intimates, and sometimes they used to pay a formal call upon him. Then he gave them China tea.

"I 'ad taken tea with him only the day before I received 'is telephone message. Then he seemed normal—he was so reserved by now that of course it was rather difficult to say whether he was normal or not—and talked quite reasonable about the series of bombing outrages which were the chief blessings of the newspapers in 1935. He said that

whoever done them was an idealist. Looking back upon it, I seem to remember that he said this rather strangely, bitterly perhaps, and with a soupçon of depression. But on the whole there was nothing remarkable about his behaviour.

"Next day he rang me up in the evening—it appears that 'e had been in the office all day, pursuing the usual routine—and asked me to come over. 'E said that he had something rather tragic to show me, and that I should find the key, in case he was called away, inside the letter-box on the other end of a string attached to the door handle.

"I found the key as he had said, and let myself in. In the passage I took off my 'at and coat and hung them up. Then I walked into the sitting-room—he never would call it a drawing-room, because he said it couldn't be unless there were ladies in the house to withdraw to it—and found James lying in front of the fireplace in a ghastly pool of blood. 'E had committed suicide with a Japanese sword, by falling on it in the high Roman fashion. The t'suba was in the middle of his chest and the blade stuck out a foot behind. It must have needed resolution to die like that. 'Is face bore an expression of profound peace.

"The coroner read out parts of the letter which the poor fellow addressed to me, and I dare say they aroused a good deal of curiosity."

"Hexcuse me," said the Etonian, and produced a battered wallet from his pocket. Out of this he

scraped a letter that was gone badly at the folds, and began to read :

“ ‘ DEAR ARCH.,—I am writing to you because of what we were talking about last night, and because I ’ave nobody else to write to, and I ’ope you will forgive a lonely man for imposing this horrid business upon you, because I have had pains in my ’ead and I do not know whether it is or not. And I do so, so hope it is. If the coroner will only say it is then I shall know and it will be alright. But I am afraid it may be the usual verdict, and then if it is just a matter of form one wont know, will one ? But I hope it is, and so I am getting rid of myself, and if one did wake up in any other form able to receive impressions of this world, and should see that it was, and that they aren’t, then what bliss it would be, and one would be glad to have killed oneself and so I am going to. It began with Liberty’s, very long ago, but it had been getting worse, and nothing I can do can stop it, so I shall.

“ ‘ This is a full confession of the man they called in the papers the Mad Aviator, and just in case they may be right for once I am killing myself to see (if one does see), and if one doesn’t it will be all over, and I can only say that I shall be very glad, because it ’as been terrible. The feeling came over me in the office this morning, when I read about the monument. And if it is so I can’t go on, and I ’ope and pray it is a delusion, because then it will end with

me. I have often thought that really I may have been killed in the war, and that I am not alive at all, but only suffering from some sort of posthumous fancy. So in that case there would be no harm in killing oneself, if one were dead already.

“ ‘ But this is idle dreaming, really, for I know that they are so and that I am no more mad than you. I shall tell the story as it occurred.

“ ‘ You know that I am rather interested in architecture. I dare say it might almost be called my main interest, and perhaps I have been interested in it more than I ought to. One ought not to take things seriously, I suppose, and ought not to mind about Liberty’s and all that. But still I can’t ’elp it, and I can’t ’elp wishing that things weren’t built on purpose to make one sick. But I am not going to write about this. Nobody would listen.

“ ‘ I did not think this at one time. Once I believed that those wickednesses were remediable, that one could take steps to keep architecture at any rate remotely possible, at any rate not actively obscene and filthy and diarrhoetic. If it had not been for this idealism I should not be where I am now.

“ ‘ I thought out a plan for the improvement of architecture some months ago. I suppose it was madly inexperienced, but then I ’ad very little to devote myself to except architecture, and perhaps I exalted its importance beyond what was right.

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I did feel that if the face of our beautiful country was to be transmitted for thousands and thousands of years to unborn generations of which we can't even begin to 'ave an idea, then one 'ad some right, if one understood, to check the present disfiguration of it by maniacs and lavatory builders. I felt that if London was to stand for another ten thousand years—and why not?—the vandalism of these people might be put a stop to, in the interests of more generations than 'ave been in England since the conquest; even if it took extreme measures. I believe the only capital crime in Scandinavian countries is treason against the state. One can understand that. Mere individual 'omicides may be forgiven, but something which endangers the 'appiness and safety of thousands calls for a stern justice. So I felt that 'ouses, which go on impressing themselves upon people for generations and generations and upon thousands of people daily, might be taken seriously. Of course, I now see that this was a ridiculous idea, but then I thought that we ought not to entrust our public buildings to people 'oo were absolutely insincere, absolutely timid and absolutely negative. I thought that the accumulation of lying, fear and indecision might 'ave a bad effect upon the character of the race. I always thought there was something wrong in lying and pretending, that Cinderellas 'oo sat among the cinders all their lives pretending that they were going to marry the Prince of Wales usually came

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to a bad end. Imagine if we all walked about saying, 'And it please you,' instead of 'please'! And yet there was Liberty's. All a piffling kind of Let's-Pretend. Imagine if we all said, 'Shall we take a dish of tay?' instead of 'Let's 'ave tea.' And yet there were all those semi-Georgian fiddle-faddles being put up in the universities and for the £1,000 a year man. And the war memorials, the agricultural colleges, the public cinemas! The late Victorian period of waterworks and lunatic asylums was infinitely preferable. There was a genuine feeling about those. Now we are so frightened of doing anything definite that we daren't 'ave a pilaster more than two inches thick. Our Georgian façades 'ave all been rolled with steam-rollers so as to make them quite insipid. Either that or just hunky. Regent Street, what can one say about that? or the monsters along the river? Or rather what could one say, for I flatter myself that my brief spell of activity was not without results.

" 'I bought my aeroplane in Germany and learnt to fly it on a two months' holiday. When I came back from Germany I approached the editor and persuaded him to give me an extra month. I had worked since 1920 without a break.

" 'I flew over the Channel one dark night and landed in Yorkshire, where I had hired a bit of moor. It was a barren and inaccessible spot, which had been used before as a private aerodrome; so

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I was not much noticed. I rather think they mistook me for the flying man who had had it previously.

“ ‘ I practised dropping bombs by releasing footballs filled with fuller’s earth, with streamers attached to them, over a cross which I had made on the hillside. I think I may say that I became quite a marksman in a short space of time. I suppose the desperate personal keenness and interest in the matter must have made me a ready learner. Then I made my first trip to London.

“ ‘ Now that I review them in the light of a life already done with, I realise that those were the happiest days of my life. I have not been accustomed to doing things well with my hands, to making a mechanical repair correctly or dropping something which at any rate resembles a ball—our English fetish—with exactitude. Now I experienced all those thrills. I lived every moment of those nights. I was doing something which I loved, and doing it well, and doing it by myself. I set out every night with exaltation. I loved my aeroplane and flew her perfectly. There was an achievement, a mastery ! Bless my soul, I can almost see myself again : the lights of my instruments lighting up my face from underneath with a subdued radiance, gleaming upon my nose with an inhuman rapture. My lion-like engines beat in harmony with my brain, and my ’cart swoops sympathetically with my soaring ship. The flame

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leaps vividly beneath me, and the air rocks, bowling and tumbling up to me, through aerial acres, the rumbling and percussive detonation of my fatal egg. I used to switch off my engine so as to hear the explosion. Then the long flight home, with victory insurgent in my veins, and the landing in the very cool and edge of dawn, among those tingling Yorkshire spaces.

“ ‘Liberty’s was easy. Since it was a business premises there were no inhabitants to get rid of. As you know I used to be chary of shedding blood—it was only the buildings that I wanted to destroy—and this used to give me many a ticklish problem. When it was just the case of a night-watchman or a caretaker I ’ad to let him take his chance. Otherwise, until my last adventure, I was free from innocent blood. My easiest coups were in the night-time, against buildings which were only inhabited by day. I still remember the Inn-sign of Liberty’s standing out against the conflagration, and the carillon of bells in ’Yde Park toppling with a melodious crash.

“ ‘Regent Street was my best piece of work. I took it in a single dive, banking at great speed in one exquisitely swerving swoop, leaving behind me the rattle of destruction and arc of jetting debris to settle in a perimeter of fire. I used incendiary bombs, loosing almost simultaneously a single swash of them, and zoomed up again into the darkness within two seconds of my first appearance.

I couldn't deny myself the pleasure of coming up to London next day by train to view the ruins.

" " I need not go through a list of my successes, for you will have read about them day by day in the newspapers. When I had touched the fringe of my subject in London I took a quick circular tour through the country. I did not confine myself to any single style of architecture. You remember the million pound cinema they were building in Croydon just as much as the extension of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, in the ruins of which they found Mr. Sidney Cockerill, stark mad, apologising to Samuel Butler and Rossetti (or was it Burne-Jones?). This latter coup perhaps requires a word of explanation. I must point out that I was very careful to release my bombs with accuracy. I believe some thought that I was attempting the Fitzwilliam itself. This was not the case. If you will look at the ruins you will see that I have shorn off the extension without disturbing a single stone of the original edifice. I 'ad to come down very low to do this, and took a great risk. Then there was an outcry about the invaluable treasures stored in the new wing, which perished with their shell. Well, it was a pity. But I 'ave never felt unjustified. We should gladly sacrifice the ninety and nine just persons for the one sinner that repenteth not.

" " You seemed surprised, when we were talking about the outrages, that no attempt was made

against the Albert Memorial. I wouldn't have dreamed of touching it. It was always a great favourite of mine. This was odd, because I am a purist—so everybody keeps telling me—and ought to dislike it *a priori*. But I have never disliked it, and I think this is because it touches my sense of pity. There is something so strangely beautiful in the faith which could conceive a monument of that description. If it were small it would have a sordid effect. But its size saves it. It is such a tremendous act of faith, like believing in fairies.

“ ‘ But I must get on with my story. I have no time. You will be here in ten minutes.

“ ‘ If I had been content with confining myself to public buildings I should never have come to my present pass. They were easy because they were unin'abited at night. But my accursed idealism led me into believing that something ought to be done about the dwelling 'ouses as well. I was very puzzled about this at first, because I felt scruples about slaughtering the people who lived in them. It would have been all right if I could have been sure that they could afford to live anywhere else. If I could have known for certain that they lived there of their own free wills then I would have had no qualms in blotting them out. But I thought that perhaps they were too poor to go anywhere else, that they were incapable on their modest incomes of finding decent houses. It was a quibble, of course, for any man whose mind was not diseased

would have preferred and selected to live in a tent. But still, it convinced me at the time. So I determined to clear the in'abitants out before smashing the place. I wanted to put an advertisement in the papers saying that Acacia Road would be bombed at noon on the thirty-first, and warning the 'ouseholders to keep clear. But I could not do that because the country was by then in a regular buzz about my activities and I should have had the whole British Air Force hovering over the place all day. What I did do, as you know, was to insert an advertisement saying that one road, out of a list of a thousand, would suffer at the given date. This split up the defenders and reduced the odds against me. Apparently the Air Minister decided that I would be bound to bomb one of the roads mentioned in the bigger towns, and concentrated the defenders over Birmingham and so forth. I rather foresaw this, and chose a road in Bexhill. You know the sort of thing: the houses called Mon Abri, looking like slices of Dutch cheese, and a crafty tea shop called Ye Blue Moon. They went up beautifully.

“ ‘ Unfortunately my strategy had defeated not only the Air Minister but also the in'abitants of Bexhill. They had decided, just as he had done, that the attempt would take place in a larger centre. With a show of spectacular bravery, but with the inward certainty that there was very little danger—it was a thousand-to-one chance, of

course—they had stayed at 'ome. I killed three colonels, twenty-four maiden ladies and a croquet champion.

“ ‘ The discovery shook me. I left the aeroplane in Yorkshire and came back to the office to think matters over quietly. I was remorseful. They brought a subscription sheet to me and asked me to subscribe to a monument for the victims. I did so, generously. This is the point. I myself subscribed generously to the monument. I saw the accepted design this morning.

“ ‘ And so I shall kill myself. I know it is not an illusion, though I pray that it is ; I know I am not mad, though I pray that I may be. Are buildings really like this ? Must monuments really resemble what I saw this morning ? I realised in one stroke the implications of that memorial as a criticism of my work. I do not know what I have done all day. I have been walking in a nightmare. I think I am becoming a little bitter. I have only one request to make. I beg that I shall be buried in some picturesque old graveyard, with an Elizabethan lychgate designed not earlier than the beginning of the present century. I desire that the tomb should be half timbered, crenelated, and lettered in Gothic. No flowers are to be sent, but the tomb may be strewn or suitably ornamented with warming pans and brass toasting forks from Ye Olde Minte House at Pevensey. Perhaps hooks, worked in fretsaw, might be attached to the tomb itself so that these

might be hung up conveniently. Otherwise I wish the tomb to be perfectly simple, unless it be for a few arts-and-crafts glass flowers in lustre bowls, or a couple of plaster-of-paris gargoyles.'

"The letter," concluded the old Etonian, "ends without any signature, in a rather pathetic little smudge as if 'e had been crying. Some'ow it touched me. Although I know he did a very wicked thing, I could not 'elp feeling that his obvious insanity excused him to a great extent. Perhaps, too, I was biased, for I 'ad known him as well as anybody. Whatever the reason, and 'owever much I may be blameworthy, I took it upon myself to see that his last wishes were fulfilled. There he rests now, poor soul, in peace, in the little Sussex cemetery which I sought out for him. Mr. Belloc and Mr. Chesterton lived near by. They were kind enough to send between them a brass beer-mug with scenes of the Conquest worked upon it in beaten lead, by the Artificers' Guild in Hove. It stands in a place of honour among the battlements, chains and gargoyles of his grave. There is even a little moat, with a real drawbridge which goes up and down to approach it by. The ensemble is surprising, though rustic and old-world to a remarkable degree. In some ways it reminds me of Liberty's : which I was glad to see they were busy rebuilding in Regent Street, just as it stood before poor James developed his mania."

CHAPTER NINE

"Talking of destruction," remarked the Professor, "it is at least a comforting thought that the slaughter above our heads has wiped out the guilty with the innocent. I daresay that even Mr. So-and-so is dead." (Here the Professor enumerated a long list of bogus litterateurs, the publication of which might make him appear uncharitable. There was the sentimental knight, and the incomprehensible poet, and the supplanter of Lewis Carroll, and the horrible little cottage dweller, and at least two ex-schoolmasters, dictating the literature of the masses with a smug, broad-bottomed insensibility.)

"Not to mention," added the Professor, "the newspaper editors, the directors of armament firms, the flogging magistrates, the cinema proprietors, the communists, the wireless announcers, the clergy, the housemasters, the bogus sportsmen, the members of parliament, the members of the League of Nations, the snobs, the adventurers, the theatrical producers, the tough-necked generals, the liberals, the oak-bottomed admirals, and all liars, snivellers and bores."

"Amen," said Pansy.

The Countess said, "I think we ought to do something about Mr. Marx here and Mary. They never say anything, sitting behind the horse there, and I don't

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believe they even listen to the stories. Love is all right, but one has one's responsibilities."

Mary said, "Honestly, we listen like anything."

"I daresay you listen," said the Professor, "but you never speak. You do nothing to make the party go."

"Let the children boide," said Mr. Romford.

"If we let them bide," said the Professor, "they'll become parasites. Parasites, Mr. Marx."

"You're jealous," said Mary.

"I'm prepared to tell a story," said Mr. Marx obstinately.

"So am I," said Mary.

"Not," pleaded Pansy, "about hunting, flying or ghosts. We've had enough of them for the moment. What we need is a real change."

"What we need is a love story," said Mary.

"But there's been love in all of them so far," protested the Professor vehemently. "There's been far too much."

The Countess began to look shy. "I could tell you a love story," she said coyly.

"Now you've done it," said Mr. Sponge.

CHAPTER TEN

They played Salted Almonds that day, and ate a real curry made by chocolate-coloured fingers and bottled at Fortnum's. Then the Countess, smoothing her hunting skirt, gave a nervous cough and began to speak.

"It is a piece of family history," she said, "that has always been kept a secret. But now that the family is over I don't see why it shouldn't be told. It's about the second Earl, the one in the picture by Lely which hangs on the staircase ; if it's still there. There used to be a rare volume about him in the library, privately published, but my husband decided to keep it under lock and key. He let me read it when we were married.

"I'm not a reading woman," continued the Countess modestly, "or not for fiction ; but for some reason or other I got interested in that book. It was a little brown thing, quarto I believe it was called, and there were several different books bound up in the one. The first story was by a fellow called Nashe, and the second was about the siege of Breda. I must have read the whole thing through five or six times. I don't know how it was. The only other thing I can ever remember reading was a story called Ulysses that was lent me by my son. It's a long book, you know, but I liked a lot of it quite a lot. I think it was about a pantomime.

But I don't think it was as good as the siege of Breda. I can remember whole bits of that, as if I had learnt it by heart.

"'Viriliously,'" declaimed the Countess suddenly, "'they stood, pouldering with Musket, Pike and hand Granad, whilst the Cannon swept away divers ranks of the Burgundians, flying in the ayre like Phrygian Eagles in a Randon. Through the excremental Smoke of their combustible Paines the Enemy sallied forth upon them, but were ever repulsed back to their owne repugnable limits, with Martiall Affronts, and loosing of lives. And Loe, the guns played they thick day and night, bellowing Bellona's Musicke, against that great and high earthen Bulwarke at Ginnekin Port, whilst the Muskets beat continually as thicke on their faces as the Winter-hayle, which whiten the ground. There went Colonel Balfoure's foure halfe Cannons against the Windemill ; there it came down with a rattle, and bruised the bones of some Burgundians, till their guts groaned againe.'

"It was that sort of thing," said the Countess. "Stirring, you know. Of course, it was a bit difficult to understand ; but then, so was Ulysses. I read it, as I say, five or six times.

"The bit about the second Earl was the best. Do you remember him in the Lely picture, with his grubby, round, snub nose and dewy eyes ? Well, as a matter of fact he was mad. He thought he was a spaniel.

“He lived in the days of the Stuarts, when people were still pretty barbarous ; and he lived at Woodmansterne, in the country. Of course that was before the house had been rebuilt by the sixth Earl, who stole two million pounds from the nation. It was just a Tudor house with a few ornamental additions to the porch and so on. The Scamperdales have generally been happier in the country than in the town, and the second Earl was no exception. He was a fine, sturdy boy, with natural advantages and a gentle heart. They worshipped him in the hamlet, and he used to ride out like a miniature gentleman, in a plumed hat and Spanish leather boots. Hawking and hunting, you know. I can’t remember what they used to hunt, but it wasn’t foxes. He was fond of hounds, almost from the cradle.

“But although country people are ten times better than town people in every way, they are still terribly cruel at heart : especially towards animals. They are horrible to badgers, for instance, and frogs, and sometimes cats. In the old days they used to get rid of unsatisfactory hounds by hanging them, just like Christians.

“That was what sent the second Earl mad. He was an advanced child of six, already accustomed to be dressed as a gentleman and treated as a possible tyrant. He was sensitive, as you would expect from those big eyes, and affectionate, and naturally inclined to be a little odd. His father had

been a very strange man indeed, copious and Elizabethan. The boy lavished a lot of his surplus love on living creatures, particularly on hounds. He had a pet owl. One day he ran into the great hall, because there was a pandemonium there. There was a noisy mixture of screaming, laughing and ferocity : rather like a pig-killing, only much worse, because the screams were more human. They went to his heart as if the creature really understood, really suffered in pitiful terror and was betrayed. The pig squeals without expression, like knives on china ; but this was a meaning lamentation, of a conscious heart. They were hanging a greyhound bitch whose temper was supposed to be uncertain. She was struggling pitifully, her *svelte* face bent sideways in agony and contortion. Her belly, with the neat double row of dugs, looked naked and shameful : as bare as a new dead pig in a butcher's shop, but alive and capable of sex. The steward and scullions had red lustful faces, through which they laughed with protruding eyes, like the bitch's. The tail curled upwards between the legs and touched the belly. She kicked like a dog dreaming of rabbits, spasmodically, with both feet together. She ran with her forefeet, snatching at the rope. She had stopped screaming when the cord grew taut ; and now, as the scullions stood aside, there were only guttural noises and her lolling eyes to greet the second Earl.

“The child ran out again without a demon-

stration, and the incident seemed to be closed. He did not lose his reason at a stroke. He had dreams, I suppose, asleep and awake. He did not speak or forget. It was only gradually noticed : when he began barking in the night or when he seemed inseparable from the Kennels. At first they thought it was a game, that the child was playing at Let's-Pretend. His father even entered into it, and patted him on the head, calling him a Good Dog.

"One day they found him inside the Kennels. He was still incapable of dressing himself, especially with those stiff pompous clothes, but he had managed to pull off one of his Spanish leather boots. He was lying in the Kennel enclosure, very ragged and dishevelled, in the sunlight. He had torn one boot to bits, and was gnawing a dry bone, his eyes scowling upwards from under his eyebrows, so that they showed a red rim. There was a great fuss trying to get him out. Finally they had to fetch his father.

" 'Come, boy,' said the first Earl. 'This is naughty.'

"But the child only growled.

"The old rip, who had made his fortune out of James the first, began to lose his patience.

" 'A pox,' he said, 'on this fooling. I shame to see it. Away to your chamber.'

"The growls became fiercer, from right down in the chest.

" 'That a Scamperdale,' said the Earl uncer-

tainly, holding out a strangely misgiving hand to touch him, 'should be such a natural!'

"The child wriggled its body.

"It was the last straw for the Earl. The growls somehow had been possible, but there was something in the incipient wagging of the tail that was not to be borne. He snatched a whip from a groom and set about his son with a kind of terrified savagery. He seemed subconsciously to have guessed the secret; and now, in a panic, he was trying to whip it out of himself, out of his issue. He was exorcising devils.

"'Obedience!' he cried. 'Obedience!' between every stroke.

"The little body, held by the nape of the neck, tucked itself in behind, doubled its wrists like the forepaws of a dog. It whimpered, wriggled, finally began to snap and bite. There was a great oath from the Earl. He dropped the child suddenly, together with the whip, and stood back stupefied, nursing his wrist. There were the bruised incisions on it of sixteen even teeth.

"'Boy!' said the Earl, with his eyes wide and his great virile back beginning to crumble: but the thing crawled forward on its belly, and licked his hand.

"After that there was nothing to be done. He was an only child, the apple of his father's eye as well as of the countryside, and he was indisputably

mad. The attempts to cure him were pathetic and terrible. Renowned scientists, who lived in the tradition of Dr. Lopez and Francis Bacon, prescribed innumerable remedies. They ranged from relatively harmless herbs and distillations of gold and snakes' fat to confinement and flagellation. They were none of them successful. After ten years of it, his father consented to the inevitable.

"They built the child a special kennel, and imported a pastry cook who made artificial bones out of cooked meat and pastry. He showed a tendency to be intolerant of clothes ; so they imported a tailor also, who made him a fur skin out of the pelt of a Russian bear for winter, and a doeskin, which turned out to be a great deal cooler, for his summer wear. By easy transitions they weaned him from the real Kennels, where he was always getting bitten by the hounds, to the artificial ones ; and thence by slow stages to the house itself, where he was treated as a house dog. He used to sleep on the bottom of his father's bed. It was pathetic to see the old man, whose wife had died some fourteen years before, sitting in the panelled room on a winter's evening, in front of the log fire. There he would sit, with his hand on the boy's head, staring into the bright heatless flames of elm. And his only son, with his chin resting on his father's knee, would stare up at him with liquid, mute, adoring eyes. Occasionally he would nuzzle with his chin, at the same time

wriggling his hinder end and making a scratching movement with his paw. The old man, who had seen so much of vice and fortune and glorious hazard, would raise his hand and pat again, or scratch gently behind the ears : until his son rolled over to the floor, and lay there, on his pelted back, presenting his belly to the delicious claw.

“ The boy, who was now sixteen, had lived on all fours for the last ten years. This had a curious effect upon his anatomy. His wrists were unnaturally strong and padded, his fingers weak. His toes, calves, hams and the small of his back were muscular, and he had a kind of biceps at the back of his neck. The inside of his forearms, chest and abdomen were shrunk.

“ Of course the lunacy laws as we know them did not exist. If you were a great man you were a potentate, and you made your own laws. You could afford to be a *lusus naturae* or a lunatic, so long as you had birth. Nevertheless, his son’s inheritance worried the Earl. There were always cousins, claimants, unscrupulous people. Even the steward and the upper servants were not above suspicion. When the first Earl was gone, there would only be a mad creature who thought he was a spaniel, an inarticulate and defenceless beast, to carry on the line. It was not so much that the Earl wanted the line to be carried on, though of course he wanted it, but that he was fond of the poor moron. Would the boy be safe, could he continue to depend upon his

simple kennel and pastry bones and kind treatment, when the great house was in the hands of a steward who was a servant only in name? The ageing Earl imagined the boy neglected, whipped, or even put away, with the present servant then the master.

“Charles the second was on the throne, the first English King to be an individual. One had only to look at the pictures, to see the change that had come about since old Scamperdale was young. There was nothing of his stammering father’s official reticences in the new monarch’s composition. The second Charles was a personality. He idled about Whitehall, relating his adventures with some redundancy to a crew of toy dogs and monkeys and mistresses. He moved through his palaces, walking very fast, in a sea of playthings ; like a man running in a doll’s house. He called it sauntering. When he was tired of playing with his retorts in the toy laboratory he would tickle the spaniels or a mistress, feed the ducks or listen to the singing boys. He would sing himself, or go to the play and make shrewd comments on the *scena*. Sometimes he would talk to Sir Christopher Wren, or to Mr. Evelyn. He was killing time.

“Or changing it at least. In the old Earl’s boyhood, that incredibly distant period when the sandy monarch had made his fortune, the King had been engaged on business of State, a figurehead for reverence. Charles the first had maintained the

tradition. Now, in 1665, this dusky foreign-faced fellow had instituted a different procedure. You had only to compare his portrait with his father's. The martyred sovereign had somehow always been conscious of his clothes, sitting bolt upright in them with a stuffed expression, as a King should. The official robes had been the official King, drawing attention away from any human face. The son had changed all that. He cultivated a sweet disorder : seemed, by lolling a crease into it, to establish a personal dominion over his royal raiment. He had invented personality.

“Unfortunately personality seemed to bring other qualities in its train. Kings, by ceasing to be figureheads only, had become human again : and humanity was fallible. The decapitated Majesty would have been blushing all day at the conversation of Old Rowley. The martyr's son, the King of England, was nicknamed after the palace goat ! Even the old Duke of Buckingham, the vacuous Steenie who had exploited the odd affections of two successive monarchs, might have been surprised at the behaviour of the new one. The new duke, for instance, had recently seduced Lady Shrewsbury, and killed her husband in a duel, which the lady herself witnessed in the costume of a page. She had held the duke's horse, not her husband's, and had gone to bed with the victor that evening : with the victor dressed in a bloodstained shirt which he had worn at the

slaughter of her spouse. Morals had become individual. There was Lady Castlemaine, lying flat on her back in her coach, being driven round the Park, with her mouth open, snoring ! In the old days, from a peeress of Scamperdale's youth, it would have been unthinkable. Station in life had been a real thing then, an institution that existed by itself. Now it was a matter of personal choice. Lady Castlemaine had gone to sleep, not because she wanted to shock an institution, but because she had decided that this course of action was, for herself, and in the circumstances, reasonable. Perhaps she had felt stuffy and tired at the same time. She had produced a piece of her own conduct. Everybody nowadays did the same. They pleased themselves. Buckhurst, Sedley and Ogle swayed at a window in the Cock Tavern, without a stitch of clothing and blind drunk, shouting at the populace. Even the King was under the imputation of being so far regardless of institutionalism as to have married two people at once.

" There was little hope that such a society would reverence the Scamperdale line. Would they see to it that the mad boy continued to inherit, simply because he was his father's son ? Custom, succession, primogeniture and rank seemed unlikely to make an appeal to the free and easy Charles. There were no *bienséances*, no traditions. It was difficult to have a right reverence for the nobility

when half of them were of your own creation : in both senses of that term. Was it Rochester who had made the famous remark when the King was addressed by a deputation as ‘ The Father of his People ’ ? Lampoons on royalty itself, by its courtiers !

“ Still, there was no other King, and there was no other solution. The aged Earl made his way to London, where his distinguished bearing, arrogant white beard, and antique clothing, created a sensation and a fashion that lasted for a fortnight. He presented himself before the nervous, gipsy-faced bundle of appreciations, and knelt down with difficulty on a satin knee. The King was touched. There was a grandeur about the old man’s magnificent mortality : the terrible grandeur of human insignificance vanquishing the gods by pride. The King consented ; and then, of course, forgot.

“ So the first Earl of Scamperdale died, at the then almost unbelievable age of eighty, and there remained a kennel at Woodmansterne, guarded over by an absent King. The King had forgotten about it, but the servants had not, and this was all that was necessary to the purposes of the dead man.

“ The second Earl’s was a peaceful reign. Everything in the uninhabited house was kept just so, against the possible contingency of the boy’s recovery. The servants were happy and industrious, ruled over by a steward who need never have incurred his master’s suspicion. The second Earl

was a spaniel, and they treated him as such. For some time there had been an effort to call him Your Lordship, but he refused to answer to the name. They called him Dowsabel, inappropriately enough, since the name is really a feminine one, but dog's names are often misleading. *Douce et belle.* It was a pretty name, and it seemed to suit the boy. There can seldom have been a better spaniel than the second Earl. The steward used to take him for walks in the fields, every afternoon, and he once caught a rabbit. His early efforts in this direction had been touching, because he ran with such difficulty on his short forearms. But as the necessary muscles developed, and the others decayed, he became more agile. He used to run with his hind legs splayed apart, so that his knees should not knock his elbows, and with his head on one side. He found this easier than keeping his head tilted back, and it gave him a fairly good field of vision on one quarter at least. He caught the rabbit by intelligence rather than speed, for he cut it off some distance from its burrow and had the sense to run for the hole rather than for the rabbit. He was a very intelligent dog. He could beg, die for King Charles, and play Trust for lumps of sugar. He did, as a matter of fact, eventually submit to being dressed up in order to be painted by Sir Peter Lely, but this made him feel foolish. The only thing that he hated was his monthly bath.

“The King remembered him, as capriciously as he had once forgotten. He happened to be talking about breeding to Dr. Bovill.

“‘*Porco Dio!*’ exclaimed the King (he was a cosmopolitan sort of creature). ‘We have forgot the spaniel Earl.’

“On matters of policy it seemed practically impossible to stir Charles into action of any sort. Nobody knew what he would do next, or if he would ever do it. Would the Duke of Monmouth be beheaded or forgiven? It was impossible to say. But when it was a matter of his own pleasure or interest, the King could act with an impulsive violence that left everybody gasping. It was like his sauntering, a rate of excursion that varied between five and six miles an hour and left the members of his entourage at intervals of a few hundred yards, fanning themselves with their hats. Within three days, which was a remarkably short space of time considering the conveyances of that age and the distance from Woodmansterne to London, the second Earl was waiting outside the King’s laboratory, on a red leather lead with a blue ribbon round his neck.

“The whole thing was done with a good deal of decency, for though Charles had few or no worries about his own respectability, he did object to humiliating other people. If Rochester had been allowed to be there, or even the Duchess of Portsmouth, there might have been talk, laughter

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and scandal. Nobody was there but Dr. Bovill. It was the kind of delicate consideration, even for an Earl who thought he was a dog, that made Charles an attractive character.

“The King came out of his laboratory, attended by three of his own little spaniels, and talked with a very gracious accent to the steward who was leading the second Earl. He asked about his lordship’s diet and manner of life, showing a lively interest in his hunting proclivities and in the rabbit which he had been able to kill. The second Earl was asked to die for King Charles, and did so gracefully. The King bent down and scratched his ear. Then, whilst the afflicted peer walked round on stiff legs sniffing the three toy spaniels, the steward was subjected to a regular interrogatory. Was the Earl easy to manage, and did he have to be corrected? Was he a good watch dog? House trained? What was his age? Dr. Bovill, meanwhile, examined the young gentleman anatomically, and made a series of notes upon the displacement of his muscles.

“The King seemed much interested in Scamperdale’s age, which was now twenty-one, and proceeded to ask a delicate question. No, his lordship had never fallen in love. Had any observations been made on this subject? Yes, the household at Woodmansterne was divided into two camps. On the one side a large majority maintained that a comely virgin would one day

materialise ; who, by striking his lordship with her feminine charms, would cure him eventually of his disorder. This majority urged a continuous introduction of virgins, in a kind of nubile parade, in order that one or another of them might catch his eye. The other small and detested faction declared that his lordship would only fall in love with a spaniel bitch, and that it would be best to yield to the forces of nature.

“Had either of these two alternatives been tried ? Yes, the one exhaustively, the other clandestinely, but neither with any success.

“His Majesty then made a few observations upon the brilliancy of his lordship’s eye, ordered that the boy should be returned to Woodmansterne, and retired into his laboratory to discuss the matter with Doctor Bovill.

Charles, time-serving and dilettante procrastinator, was at heart a philosopher. He would only live once and it behoved him to live as best he could. He was a man, and he knew it, with a man’s life and transience under the formal crown. What was the good of making a fuss about kings and diplomats and foreign policy, when all these things could be dealt with by those who were interested in doing so, and when there was so little time to solve the riddle of the universe ? It was his Latin fatalism, his experienced philosophy (had he not hidden in an oak tree on peril of his life ?) that drove him from mistress to mistress, from ex-

periment to experiment, on those striding legs. He was an honest scientist, seeking after truth. His only vice was too much opportunity.

“So, when the really rather interesting psychological freak of the second Earl was brought before him, Charles took to it with avidity. It was just the sort of phenomenon which appealed to the scientists of the seventeenth century. Sir Thomas Browne would have discussed it seriously and sensibly in his *Vulgar Errors*, and the King was as interested and tenacious. He was a man of worldly judgments, like most secret Catholics, and he instantly singled out the material points. To him the salient interest was that of sex. He had no desire to cure the Earl. For one thing there were plenty of normal Earls and only one who believed himself to be a spaniel. For another, the boy had remained a dog for fifteen years and a cure was improbable. The King, with his strange mixture of moody restlessness and humour, was delighted by the toy, diverted by it, and at the same time sympathetic. He was sorry for the Earl, who was evidently charming : with the sweet appeal and dependence of a good dog. It gave his Majesty a sense of responsibility.

“There was very little that one could do for a dog, except find it a mate. Apparently neither human beings nor other dogs would do. It was Dr. Bovill who hit on the tentative solution. The Earl of Scamperdale believed himself to be a dog : the

future Countess would have to believe herself to be a bitch.

“The investigation was set on foot with industry and expedition. A royal commission, presided over by Dr. Bovill, went through Bedlam with a fine comb. There was a woman there with hydrophobia, but she had only just been admitted and died at once : this was the nearest that they got. A minority of the Commission thought that if the human-bitch were cried in all the towns and villages of England, something might be done. The majority decided against this, after consulting the King. Charles, with those attractive scruples of his, disliked the idea for the Earl’s sake. It seemed somehow too common and public. After all, Scamperdale was an Earl : and on top of that there was the recollection of a fierce rheumatic knee, bending in white satin to a monkey face ; an old intransigent knee that had bent to Charles the first in its maturity, and, earlier still, to ginger-headed James, in gallivanting silk. His Majesty kept the investigation royal. Agents were dispatched, travelling in a tedious and sober secrecy, to the courts of Europe.

Slowly, in the course of two years, the possibilities began to materialise. In Naples there was said to be a woman who had given birth to a girl child with the head of a mongrel. Alexis of Russia discovered a village in Siberia which was entirely populated by recognisably human beings who appeared to bark.

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A tribe was reported in the far East, probably the Ainus of Japan, which was said to be covered with hair. Alfonso the Sixth received letters from Goa about a Brahmin who walked upon his elbows and knees. Francesco Cornaro wrote from Venice of a boy with a tail six inches long.

“It was from Scotland, in spite of all these world-wide researches, that the eventual solution came. There was on the slopes of Lochnager a crofter woman of forty winters who believed herself to have been possessed by a were-wolf. The girl child who had been the issue of this union was the wicked wonder of the district, as far as Morven Hill and Ben Macdhui. She had been stoned on three occasions, and once, in early childhood, left for dead. She spoke no human tongue, ran on all fours, and was supposed to worry sheep. Only the unaccountable affection of maternity had kept her living in the bitter northern world. The tiny but-and-ben had been besieged by troopers from Braemar, and a minister of Dundee itself had denounced the witch-woman with the fruits of her wickedness from the Sabbath desk. The mother barricaded her door, protected the poor unnatural offspring in all the power of her aboriginal widowed womanhood. The dour religious crusaders, who had marched from Blair Atholl and Ballater against the inveterate enemy of man, laid faggots around the rough stones of her little house ; lighted them with the fierce ribaldry of licensed beastliness ;

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stood around with sticks and muskets to extirpate the ungodly couple in a sadistic orgy of religious fear. When the smoke was intolerable and the reddish stones the close walls of an oven, the mother opened her door. She stood there, snarling and dishevelled, with her grey hair in wisps, the type and picture of the devil's dam. They shot her through the heart. The mad maid was crouching in a corner, and her they stripped. Naked, which she did not mind, repulsive, as she was by birth, grinning with a trebled lunacy, they took her to the lock-up at Braemar, to be burned in state.

"The King reprieved her, but not without a struggle. The Scottish glens were remote in those days and difficult to subdue. She was reprieved and bundled into a coach. The coach, staggering over the Devil's Elbow and through the Spital of Glenshee, carried its burden into Perth. She was guarded by a troop of horse. All the way through England the cavalry jingled by the side of the black box, and the box itself swayed on its inadequate springs, and the vulpine creature inside the box could be heard mumbling over its raw bones. If the door was opened, she hid herself in a corner and snarled: a dangerous grating snarl, like the passage of two rough surfaces over one another. It was impossible and unsafe to coax her out. At Doncaster there was a new moon and she howled all night.

"The King went to Woodmansterne to conduct

his experiment. He slept in a rose-velvet bedroom with a silver toilet set and silver mirrors. In the morning the coach arrived.

“ They took the second Earl into the great hall, which was on the ground floor directly within the porch, and they brought the black coach to the porch door. A file of troopers stood on either side of the coach with sabres drawn, so that the only exit was the entrance to the hall. They evicted her with a rustic fork.

“ The King and Dr. Bovill, with a few members of their suite and the steward and the upper servants, stood in the minstrels’ gallery above the hall. A groom with a drawn sword and an ancient pistol was stationed at the still-room door, in case interference should be needed. There was an uproar outside, with shouts, commands and banging of sticks. The porch door, which had been open to the sunlight, swung quickly to. In the darkness, under the dim Tudor roof, there were two creatures living.

“ She stood still, whilst her eyes accustomed themselves to the half light. The second Earl, who had risen from his corner by the fireplace at the first noise, walked towards her with his head down : a stealthy and dangerous approach. She smelt him before she saw. Her eye-teeth, which were unusually long, bared themselves in a wolfish sneer. She drew back, bewildered by so many things that had happened to her so lately, with her flank

against the wall. Poor thing, she was not only a wolf but a trapped one ; not only a trapped wolf, but a Scottish wolf, in a foreign snare. The second Earl came up to her with a suspicious growl. She snarled, rigid, with averted head, glaring out of the corners of her eyes. The Earl halted within a yard. He sniffed and grumbled. She was as still as marble. He walked round her in a semi-circle, on stiff legs, and sniffed her whilst she hunched her back. He stood aside also, for a moment, and looked at her out of the corners of his eyes. The two beasts remained motionless. Then the boy dissolved ; walked up to her without a trace of fear ; scratched her with the fingers of his paw. She flew at him at once. Her teeth, meeting in his shoulder, caused the King to make a hurried movement of anxiety. But the second Earl rolled over on his back. He wagged his bottom in a friendly gesture, smiled with a vacuous expression, and opposed no further efforts to the feminine vagaries of the second Countess of Scamperdale."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"We arranged," said the Professor as soon as the Countess had finished, "that this was to be a sporting Decameron. When you said that yours was going to be a love story, I think I had every right to protest. Quite apart from moral considerations. But I admit that it wasn't so bad as I expected. If only all love stories could be like that!"

Mr. Romford said, "Moy buoy, all lovers are lunatics."

"But few so frankly so."

"Quite," said Pansy, looking over the top of the mechanical horse.

"There is something fascinating about oddities," pursued the Professor. "They appeal to the imagination. 'Gulliver's Travels' amuses children for that reason. We like to hear about dwarfs and monsters. There was Sir Jeffrey Hudson, for instance, who was presented to Henrietta Maria in a pie."

"I can remember hearin' of a feller when I was a young man," said Mr. Sponge, "who was born without legs or arms. Only stumps, you know. He was a squire somewhere in Ireland. But he contrived to hunt, shoot, fish, sire his family, and sit in parliament. He used to hunt in a sort of barrel strapped to the saddle, with the reins round his shoulders."

"Then," said the Professor, "there was the tiny

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Sir Hercules at Crome, perhaps the most exquisite story that ever was written."

"If it comes to dwarfs," said Mary, "and if Pansy is to continue leering at us over this horse, and if you really think that John and I are not pulling our weight, I could tell you another family history like the last."

"Do, dear," said the Countess. "I'm very fond of history."

"But surely not two on one night?" asked Mr. Sponge.

"Why not?" enquired the Professor.

Facey nudged Soapey in the ribs. "Where's yer manners?" he whispered hoarsely. "It's a lady, isn't it?"

"Very well," said Mary Springwheat, and emerged from behind the horse.

"My father's grandfather on his mother's side," said Mary, "was a Yorkshire squire of the name of Hance. He was born to a generous inheritance on the distaff side, and was the eldest of four brothers; but he was only twenty-seven inches high."

"Is this," asked the Professor, "going to be a crib on Huxley?"

"Not entirely," said Mary. "The problem is different. In fact it is the kind of problem that demands a title, and I shall call it, 'The Philistine Cursed David by his Gods.' You will be able to guess the dilemma as we go along."

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"Loike a bleeding parlour game," said Facey to Soapey behind his hand, thinking of the Nap which nobody would play.

Miss Springwheat ignored the interruption.

"My great-grandfather flourished in the early nineteenth century, in the time of Osbaldeston, and Coke of Norfolk, and Lord George Bentinck. In order to understand his story you will want a knowledge of his period, and so you must forgive me if I begin to get a bit historical.

"The early nineteenth century is a period which fascinates me more than others. There has never been a mode for it, because it was too short and peculiar to leave a cult. Elizabethanism and Georgianism and Victorianism have all been taken up by fashionable people with cultural pretences, but nobody has ever invented an enthusiasm for the afterglow of William the Fourth. It is because the period was brief. It was transitional, individual, complicated, but with an amazing bouquet. It smelt dimly of the Regency, dimly of mahogany, but more than anything else of country life.

"I don't know how to explain it, or which peculiarities to collect. You must think of shooting and hunting and boxing and betting and left-handed alliances and port.

"I think the betting, really, is the important

trait. Everybody betted about everything, and nearly everybody was ruined. Why did people bet? Well, I suppose to a certain extent they did so to escape from tedium. Prinny, for instance, betted about the flies on the rainy window pane because there was nothing else to do. The means of transport were so slow, one was so much of a fixture in whatever place one happened to be in, that a selection of parlour games were needed, and places to play them. One betted at the clubs. The Anglesey Stakes at Goodwood defined a Gentleman Rider as a member of White's, Brooke's, Boodle's, or one of six other fraternities. It was a simple definition, but it met the case. Everybody who was a gentleman belonged to a club, and in the club he lost his money.

"The main cause behind the wagers was something other than tedium. It was a peculiar phobia, very distinctive of the period. It was a matter of courage.

"When Henry Mytton jumped the park railing, or locked his wife in the Kennels, or hunted with a broken arm, he was producing an attitude towards courage. He was showing or encouraging bravery and endurance with a fanatical zeal. Endurance for him was the important thing in the world. Perhaps it was because the people of the eighteenth century had so much to endure. Think of the Loblolly man, who held you down for amputation without anæsthetics in naval engagements, and the

cock fights, and the pugilists, and the schoolboys killing each other at Eton, and the birch of Dr. Keate. Ferocity, Courage, Endurance. It was the craze of the century. Osbaldeston betted that he would ride two hundred miles in ten hours, and he did it in less than nine. That is the perfect example, which made him the first man in the country. The nation rose to him and called him the Squire of England. It was because he showed endurance ; and financial courage beside it, in the money match.

“ You see, people wagered for courage. They wanted to show that they were not afraid to lose. They wanted to be brave in every way, even against the forces of hazard. England was a second Sparta. Henry Mytton burned himself to death to show that he could bear physical pain ; Osbaldeston, after being jumped on by Sir James Musgrave, lying on the ground with his boot full of blood and the bones protruding through the skin, remarked, ‘ I am so unlucky that I *think* I shall give up hunting,’ and did not ; a member of the Portland Club played billiards for twenty-four hours on end ; a man called Baker walked sixty-five miles in one day, and two thousand miles in forty-two ; a Mr. T. of Kensington bet 150 guineas that he would drive his tandom full speed against the wheels of the first seven vehicles he should meet on the Brentford Road, and won in 25 minutes.

“Imagine a motorist of the present day offering to drive his car against the wheels of the first seven lorries on the Great North Road. It seems to be lunacy. And yet it is the kind of lunacy that makes an appeal, if you understand it. It was the lunacy of endurance and courage ; and it was the lunacy of something besides. These lunatics were individuals. Perhaps that is the most important glimpse of all.

“A gentleman in the first half of the nineteenth century was a person who existed by himself. He lived quite obviously in his own world and was ultimately alone in it. This is true of a person in any century, but it took an early Victorian to realise the truth. Once the fact was realised a certain attitude of mind developed naturally. Osbaldeston knew that he was alone, knew that in the last resort the only thing he truly possessed was his own sturdy little body. He had acres and houses and clothes to dress the body in, but finally speaking these were only trappings. He was a nude male of little over five feet, weighing eleven stone. That was his weapon in a hostile and frequently painful world. Painful in the literal sense : think of the lack of anæsthetics, the country dentist, and the activities of Dr. Keate.

“Well, the one weapon was bound to react. It had to meet the hostilities and the pain. It had to be capable of vanquishing them in its own person, stripped of the acres and the clothes. That was why

the nobility learned to box, why pugilism was a noble art. Physically, individually, as a special, single and metaphorically naked man, the gentleman of the early nineteenth century pitted himself against the universe and backed himself to win. You had to bet on yourself ; you had to be able to stand on your own legs and carry money on them. The wager was an affirmation of your personality, a defiance of the surrounding world, a challenge issued against the flogging authorities and the malevolent gods. Mr. T. of Kensington was a man who was not afraid of destiny. He believed in himself. His spartan prowess, his physical courage and power to endure, were at bottom a defence of the individual.

“ And what individuals they were ! James Hirst of Rawcliffe used to hunt with the Badsworth on a bull, and had trained a black sow to stand game. She was excellent with partridge, pheasant, blackgame, snipe and rabbit, but never pointed a hare. A certain Mr. Ireland bet a certain Mr. Jones that he could cover one hundred yards in fewer than thirty hops, and did it in twenty-one. It scarcely comes as a surprise that the Rev. Robert Lowe, the sporting parson of Nottinghamshire, should have had two daughters with red eyes and white hair, who could only see in the dark.

“ Well, I have said all I can do about the period, without feeling successful, and at the risk of being dull. Perhaps I ought to say something about the

atmosphere. Have you ever for several days on end got up at half-past five for cubbing and at half-past four to shoot the early season duck? You remember the appetite for breakfast, and the mixed feeling of the afternoon, conscious of tingling eyelids and hardy muscles, and the drugged sleep at night. It is the healthy endurance of the eighteenth century. Those were the sports which these people indulged in. The Regency atmosphere, in which the betting was nocturnal and urban, had given place to a country air. The feats of Osbaldeston were feats on horseback and with guns. The early Victorian rose early and affirmed his singular manhood before dawn. The Squire of England hunted six days a week, staying in the saddle eleven hours a day, and kept his bed till noon on Sunday for a change.

“It was in this atmosphere that my great-grandfather Hance was saddled with the necessity of supporting his twenty-seven inches. You see that it was needful to define the atmosphere in order to explain his problem. He was twenty-seven inches high, in a world where it was necessary to be an individual, and a physically conquering one at that. Men, like horses, had to endure and to achieve. The unhappy Rattler, an American trotter, trotted thirty-six miles at sixteen or seventeen miles an hour, and died of it. Naturally it was for a bet.

“My great-grandfather Hance was a sporting

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gentleman with the best, a gentleman of the Fancy. They called him Little Tommy, and he came in for a good deal of chaff during the ascendancy of Jackson's famous Tom Thumb. You might have thought that his stature would have assured him of his admission as an individual amongst those individual bucks. Perhaps it might have done, but Little Tommy was not contented with a success of esteem which depended upon his peculiarity alone. He was horribly sensitive, doomed by his destiny to make good.

"Moving in a world of giants who asserted themselves by muscle, of masters of hounds who fought their post-boys with bare fists and controlled their fields by setting about them with a hunting crop, the dwarf found himself oppressed by physique. Everything that made for greatness seemed so terribly physical, so overbearingly measurable in beef and bone. Perhaps he might have retired from the contest, making himself his own intellectual world like Pope or Voltaire. But Little Tommy was sharpened by the challenge, and went out to meet the Philistines on their own ground.

"He used to hunt with Sir Richard Sutton's hounds, on a mount that was less than fifteen hands but still seemed ridiculously big for him. Nobody could cut him down. Even in those days, when Fernely could paint a scene near Melton that depicted a fox in front, then a member of the field, then several more members braining a solitary

hound, then the main body, then the master blowing his horn, and then the hounds running in the opposite direction: even in those days of green-eyed jealousy, nobody could cut Little Tommy down. He rode in the first flight, with Sir James Musgrave and Assheton Smith. He had trained himself to be able to drink a bottle of port without reeling, which was by no means bad for his capacity, and he shot with precision, using a toy gun whose bore might have corresponded to our own four-ten. He was a great man for the then new-fangled introduction of the percussion cartridge.

“My great-grandfather owned an estate in Yorkshire, of about fifteen thousand acres, and it was there that he used to entertain the famous shots. Shooting in the eighteen twenties was curiously different from the shooting now. On the one hand the weapons were primitive, on the other the game was easy. The sportsman had to discharge a heavy flintlock, tediously loaded, which hung fire between the pulling of the trigger and the issue of the shot. A double-barrel was considered unsporting. In spite of this cumbersome and inaccurate contrivance, the famous marksmen were able to record amazing feats: one hundred pheasants with one hundred shots, ninety-seven consecutive grouse, and twenty brace of partridges with forty shots from an eighteen-bore. Their prowess was accounted for by the nature of the

game. Crops then were cut by hand, so that the stubble stood high and birds could be walked up close. The birds themselves were less wild. The guns were sometimes of an astonishing calibre. Osbaldeston was in the habit of shooting pigeons with a bore whose diameter was an inch and a half.

“ Little Tommy used to entertain his guests at Bushel, and revelled in the entertainment. His shooting was magnificent, so that the guest was pleased to be polite in return for the sport, and the dwarf used to be able to sun himself in the equality which his muscular giants seemed to offer. He had a charming wife, whose mother had been the penniless widow of a dean, and he could boast of her beauty without fear or favour throughout the county. The only immediate cross he had to bear was the neighbourhood of Sir Marcus Izall, the landlord of an extensive property which marched with his own.

“ Sir Marcus Izall came of a family older than the Squire's. There seemed to be no chink in the armour of his superiority, by which he could be attacked. He stood six feet in his stockings, was a shot who lived in the same category as Lord Huntingfield, and a distinguished ornament to the mad Meltonians. He was a man of commanding presence, handsome, dashing, very popular with the ladies. He played whist at the usual stake of £100 the trick, and £1000 the rubber, with an elegant lack of care that spoke worlds about his

fortune. He was popular with both sexes, since popularity usually follows success, and he seemed incapable of fear or blunder. He was the man whom Little Tommy hated above all others in the world.

“ They had been brought up in adjacent houses, and children are instinctively cruel. In his childhood Sir Marcus had not yet been taught to conceal his feelings, if they were liable to wound. Little Tommy had learned the world’s attitude to oddities from the boy’s lips. Their parents had encouraged them to play together, with the stupid blindness common to parents in all ages. Tommy had been held up to Marcus as a model of sanctity : Marcus to Tommy, when there was still some faint hope of the latter’s growth, as the type of sturdy boyhood. Naturally they had hated each other like poison, and in Tommy’s case feared. He was always terrified that Marcus would commit a physical assault upon him. And Marcus, divining the fear by instinct, assumed a horrible ascendancy.

“ These physical repulsions are an unpredictable thing. That the dwarf should be afraid of the giant, with the imaginative horror of boyhood, was understandable. But that the giant should have hated the dwarf was a puzzle. Perhaps he hated him for being a model of sanctity ; perhaps it was a purely physical repugnance, between creatures of a different species. Whatever the reason, Sir Marcus had become the persecutor of his neighbour.

“ All the cruel things that had been said to Little Tommy, and all the practical jokes that had been played upon him, seemed to have originated in the neighbouring house. It was the age of practical jokes. Theodore Hook, who perpetrated the Berners Street Hoax, was still alive. You remember the Hoax. A lady resident had earned the animosity of Mr. Hook, and he sat down to write a series of letters. The letters resulted in the simultaneous arrival outside her door of vehicles for coal, furniture, wedding cakes, hearses, sweeps, tradesmen, lawyers, clergymen, fishmongers, brewers, the Lord Mayor, and the Duke of Gloucester. They filled Berners Street from end to end. The Prince Regent was so delighted that he presented Mr. Hook to a sinecure worth two thousand pound a year.

“ The joke was cruel, typical of the period. The lady of Berners Street had to endure it. She, as an unaided individual, was expected to be able to stand up to all those external hearses. She was expected to possess the virtues of Sparta : what we should call ‘ guts,’ and what they called ‘ bottom.’

“ Little Tommy hated references to his stature. Sir Marcus, whilst they were still on visiting terms, used to talk incessantly about Rutlandshire and the advantages of living at Chiswick. He used to send Little Tommy presents of snipe, whitebait, dwarf gooseberries, and small beer. On the occasion of

Tommy's marriage he sent him a doll's house, fitted with a cradle two inches long, and a letter giving helpfully intimate advice which can hardly be reproduced in our own century. The Squire of Bushel flew into a screaming passion and tried to pick a quarrel with his persecutor. But Sir Marcus only laughed. It must have been the worst blow. The boisterous mockery, contemptuous and unassailable, rang in the tiny ears long afterwards.

"My great-grandfather entertained as usual in the early autumn of 1838. He was unlike Sir Hercules Lapith, in that he took the greatest pain not to be provided with instruments commensurate to his stature. Even his horses were too big for him, and the four-ten with which he used to shoot was as large comparatively as Osbaldeston's pigeon gun. He regarded these things as necessary concessions. A normal flint-lock would have been nearly beyond his powers to carry. When, however, it came to the frills of life, inessentials like knives and forks and chairs, he refused to be catered for. He would climb tediously into the grown-up chair, and there, kneeling surreptitiously on the seat, he would shovel cooked meat into his mouth with a fork that bore comparison with his arm.

"It was horrible to watch him being jolly with his guests, and still more horrible when he felt it incumbent upon him to become boisterous after dinner. To hear him talk about the muscle of Simon Byrne, who had killed the Scottish Cham-

pion at a boxing match in 1830, was a humiliation to the listener. The poor little creature played the physical game with a dreadful insincerity, like a small boy trying to smoke and swear.

“ Little Tommy was anxious to wager on himself. It kept him in the swim, made him feel that he was living the gigantic life successfully. Unfortunately he would never stake upon his peculiarities. If he had betted on his ability to crawl through drain pipes or ride a Shetland pony forty miles, he would have been betting sensibly and making the best of a bad job. But he refused to be sensible or to admit the job. He once wagered a thousand pounds that he would beat Captain Bentinck in a rowing match from Vauxhall Bridge to Whitehall. He had a special boat constructed, suitable to his own size ; but lost the wager lamentably, having been beaten by the waves. On this occasion Sir Marcus Izall sent him a model steamer, five foot long. The jibe entered into his poor little heart ; and the Squire of Bushel became secretly unbalanced about competitions. It became a necessity that he should beat a grown man, on his own ground, in order to reinstate his pride. It was not until 1838, at dinner in the early autumn, that the proper opportunity came to hand.

“ The great Captain Fosse was staying at Bushel and the conversation turned on the killing power of the Squire’s four-ten. Of course Little Tommy maintained that you could kill more accurately

with it than with a larger gun, implying that his reason for not using a twelve-bore was in reality a matter of choice. Captain Fosse objected that the hare, the duck and the pigeon could scarcely come within the category. A head shot at a reasonable distance would account for them, but surely the chances of success were widened by the radius of a twelve-bore. There was a good deal of desperate violence in Tommy's arguments and Fosse was a touchy man. There were plenty of hares at Bushel.

"The upshot was of course a stake.

"I think I ought to mention the wagers of those days. The aphorism that all was fair in love and war was extended into a trinity by the addition of money bets. A wager was fair game for evasion, and the man who won money by observing the letter of the bet but not the spirit was regarded as a legitimate and admirable speculator. Thus Lord Middleton once had a shooting match with a keeper, under the terms of which each had to carry the other's game. The keeper was the better shot and the stronger man. He soon had Lord Middleton staggering across the moors under a load which extinguished all hopes of success : I should say, which would have extinguished all hopes, if Lord Middleton had not had the inspiration to shoot a donkey. So people had to be careful about framing their bets in writing. The stake and conditions were drawn up like a legal document, with a view, from each side, of excluding the

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evasions of the other party. A wager became a solemn undertaking, carefully and almost legally certified, reported widely and considered with gravity. Sir Marcus Izall, along with the rest of the sporting society, heard of the bet.

“It was impossible that the two men should walk up the game together; for a given hare, equidistant from the two guns, would always be killed by Captain Fosse before Mr. Hance was in range. The solution that Mr. Hance should walk ten yards in advance of his opponent was objected to by the Captain. So the estate was divided into two halves, at a conference that lasted for four hours, and the competitors drew lots for the halves. It was to be a two-day match, and each was to be allowed to shoot over the territory of the other on the second day. The competitors were to be given the services of a gillie and the supervision of an umpire. Mr. Hance insisted that his own gillie and umpire should walk two hundred yards behind him. He pointed out, reluctantly, that his height gave him a necessary advantage in approaching within range of the quarry: an advantage that would be overthrown by the presence of the other two. After a violent argument Captain Fosse agreed. The match was dated for the following day.

“It was a bright Yorkshire morning, with the edge of winter in the sunny air, and a light wind to rustle the stubble fields: warm in the sun but cold in the shade. Little Tommy had lain awake all

night. He was nervous and made a poor business of his first hare, breaking its back near its hind legs. The unpleasantness of killing it whilst it screamed pulled him together, and he shot faultlessly thereafter. The advantage of his height in stalking proved exactly equal to the advantage of Captain Fosse's bore : and they came in at sunset with twenty-seven hares apiece

"The second day was to be the deciding factor. On the first day Captain Fosse had walked the strip of territory that marched with Sir Marcus Izall's. Now it was Tommy's turn to patrol the frontier. It was for two nights now that he had lain awake, inventing magnificent opportunities, and he was a jumpy shot. On top of that there was the proximity of Sir Marcus, whom he imagined walking stealthily beside him, on the other side of the hedge. Also the hares were thinned.

"Little Tommy plodded through the stubble fields (they reached almost to his thighs) in an anguish of fear and exhaustion. Everything that he wanted to stand for, all the equalities which nature had forbidden him in a whimsy, depended upon the results of his match. He had set not his heart upon it but his life, his self-respect. In an obscure way he would be able to bear even Sir Marcus with equanimity, if he could only win his bet. He would have achieved, asserted his personality, united himself with the spirit of his century. Unfortunately, he had only killed seven hares.

“ One of the factors which must be taken into consideration was the length of his stride. He had to take three paces for every one of his opponent’s, and these were paces over country where impediments were trebled. If Captain Fosse walked fifteen miles, the dwarf had to walk forty-five. The undertaking was prodigious ; the odds against him, and the fatigue, extreme.

“ It was at twilight that he came to his last field, with his seven hares in hand and his umpire three hundred yards behind him. He was exhausted, trembling with apprehension for the news of Captain Fosse. The sense of Sir Marcus Izall’s proximity was overpowering in the dim light. He reached his last field ; and it contained a hare. It was the first hare he had seen for three hours. He was almost too tired to shoot.

“ The tiny mannikin stood still for a moment, looking at the hare with a dazed expression, as if it were a foreign thing. Captain Fosse was somewhere in the county, miles away to his left, with an unknown bag. He was an almost certain winner. But not certain. The hares had been thinned.

“ An expression of cunning came into the miniature eye, a chance of possible triumph and a weary anxiety. He began to shake, whether from exhaustion or from fear it was not possible to say. He glanced nervously over his shoulder, and the umpire was at his proper distance, almost invisible in the gathering night. He would see no details.

The Squire of Bushel went down on hands and knees, rose cautiously at less than twenty yards. The hare was upright, its ears erect. Little Tommy was torn in an anguish between the desire to go nearer and the fear of disturbing the quarry. He raised his gun with the caution of a flower opening to the sun, hung on the aim until the barrel seemed to point in all directions, and pulled the trigger. It was a horrible breach of etiquette, a sitting shot. The hare fell over.

“Little Tommy found himself running on shaking legs, whose knees swung outwards with alarming independence; found himself holding the hare by the ears and looked at it with an astonished eye. Sir Marcus Izall, with several ladies and Sir Bellingham Graham, had popped up behind the neighbouring hedge, laughing as if they were going to burst. The hare hung in his hand in a stiff squatting position, with its forelegs doubled up as if it were trying to beg. It was rather badly stuffed.

“Captain Fosse, who had staggered nervously home with thirteen kills, comes out rather well in the sequel to the match. It was he who carried the challenge, with perfect gravity, to the landowner next door. Sir Marcus could laugh it off till he was blue, but the Captain was tenacious. He offered as a concession that the Squire should shoot from horseback, so as to make a better mark.

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“Eventually Sir Marcus shrugged his shoulders and asked Sir Bellingham Graham to act as his friend. Sir Bellingham made excuses and refused. He was a good-natured man, faintly ashamed of the practical joke. A local justice of the peace, a man named Farrar, came forward and took his place.

“The arrangements for a duel were as complicated as the arrangements for a bet, but they went forward with a kind of formal celerity. It was arranged that Mr. Hance’s duelling pistols should be used, a beautiful pair specially made by Joe Manton some ten years before. They were of normal calibre but extraordinarily light, in order to suit the then hypothetical requirements of the Squire. Sir Marcus consented to this with a curious indifference, although it would put him at the disadvantage of practice. Both men were known to be able to put ten shots on the ace of diamonds at twenty yards.

“When Captain Fosse finally got home, late that night, he found the Squire in bed, but waking. He told him that the matter would have to be settled next morning at six o’clock, on the sands near Scarborough. It was the earliest moment at which the light could be expected to be perfect, and it would entail a journey of two hours by coach, before dawn.

“The miniature Squire got out of bed at once, and spent the night putting his affairs in order, with the assistance of the Captain. It was a

lengthy job, particularly as the Squire's mind was not in the work.

"He was not afraid. Far from it, he burned with a rapture of enthusiasm that made him a troublesome partner at making wills. It was exactly what he wanted, the very thing to solve his troubles in a flash. He gloated on the figure of speech. 'In a flash' he remarked to the labouring Captain, *à propos* of nothing at all. But the Captain recognised a part of the allusion, saw the mental flame stabbing the darkness, and smelt powder.

"Little Tommy was beside himself with excitement. He tried to behave with dignity and to give an undivided attention to his estate, but all the time he was thinking of the flash. The little Manton would nestle in his hand, as light as if it had been baked by a French cook, and he would press the trigger and the flash would leap out of the noise. The black and smelly powder would hang for a moment, obscuring the crumbling figure of Sir Marcus, and as the figure crumbled his own troubles would vanish with the smoke. It would make up for the match at hare-shooting even. He forgot all resentment towards Sir Marcus. It never crossed his mind that he might himself be killed.

"You see, the duel had turned out to be a way of meeting the giant race, arm against arm, and of establishing his equality on common ground. It was the perfect way. His blundering previous

attempts to justify his early Victorian body, with rowing of races and shooting of hares, had been fumbling only towards the great solution. When he had killed a man of normal stature, actually raped him of his life under refereed conditions, he might well be able to boast himself the equal of the race. Sir Marcus would be his stepping stone to equality, and little Tommy forgave him for that reason ; though he was faintly glad that it was Sir Marcus he was going to kill and not somebody else.

“Just before they started, at four o’clock, he remembered his last duty. He went into his wife’s bedroom and woke her up.

“ ‘ Philadelphia,’ he said, ‘ I am going after the duck.’

“ ‘ Why tell me ? ’ enquired Mrs. Hance.

“ ‘ I was thinking that you might like to know,’ said the Squire awkwardly. Then, taking one of her fingers in his small fist, he kissed her clumsily on the knuckles. He went down to the coaches in the dark.

“The topic of conversation between Bushel and Scarborough was a continuous interrogatory conducted by the Squire on the subject of the Osbaldeston-Bentinck affair. Was it true that one or both of the pistols had not been loaded with ball ? Had he Captain Fosse’s solemn assurance that nothing of that sort would be allowed to happen on the present occasion ? Was Farrar absolutely to be trusted ? Might he load the pistols

himself? Would the principals start with their back to one another?

“On this point the Captain had something to say. No, the principals would not start back to back. It had been arranged that Mr. Hance should fire from horseback, and the turning of his horse would put him at a disadvantage. The principals would stand facing one another, but they would be required by the judge to hold their pistols at their sides and to look at him. The pistols would not be cocked. The judge was instructed to say two words, ‘Ready? Fire!’ Until he said the second word neither of the protagonists was to look away from the judge or to raise or cock his pistol.

“Little Tommy seemed scarcely to be listening. Was it true, he enquired, that Colonel Anson had stopped Mr. Osbaldeston at the critical moment and then given Lord George Bentinck the word to fire when the former was off his guard? Was the judge in the present instance to be absolutely depended upon? It was a matter of the first importance.

“They walked over the dunes in the early light, ploughing through the dry heavy powder of the sand, skirting the prickly grasses which bound the barriers together against the sea. There was a nip in the air. One of the coach horses was unharnessed and led down to the beach. Sir Marcus had not arrived.

“Waiting is usually the worst part of anything

that we have to suffer. On the beach there was nothing to do. If the idea of being killed had crossed my great-grandfather's mind he might have spent the next half-hour in torment. On the contrary, he was as happy as a sandboy. The solution of his troubles had been sprung upon him so beautifully, and without the necessity of effort on his part, that he never doubted for a moment. Sir Marcus was sure to come, sure to be killed. Little Tommy spent the time throwing pebbles at the seagulls, as if there was nothing else that mattered in the world.

"Sir Marcus arrived. He advanced with the surgeon, Mr. Farrar and the judge, all four dressed in long black cloaks. Sir Marcus had a black neckerchief as well, so that there was no white showing on his person. He was pale but perfectly controlled, and was seen to be laughing heartily at a private joke. The judge approached Captain Fosse, asking whether it might not be possible to settle the affair without bloodshed at the last moment. Captain Fosse had been instructed to refuse. Sir Marcus and Mr. Farrar then most irregularly approached the Squire and suggested that the duel should be fought with squirts. They produced a brace of them and offered to squirt their opponent. Captain Fosse angrily interposed.

"Everything began to pass in a kind of dream, smoothly and without feeling. Mr. Hance mounted the coach horse, the distances were paced, the

pistols loaded by the judge and inspected by both seconds. Sir Marcus and Mr. Hance avoided each other's eyes. It must have been at this time that the former realised his position. His last taunt had been instinctive, his hopes of bluffing it out, of seeing the catastrophe averted in time by some external agency, were vain ; and he was a proud man. He waited, looking at the sand.

"For Mr. Hance the world went into slow motion. They faced the judge obediently, seeing behind him the white arrested flakes of the gulls and the ground mist of September. The judge had a small wart beside his nose. Little Tommy sat sideways on his horse, barebacked, looking at the wart. The backbone of the horse was hard.

The judge spoke distinctly, using the expected formula. The pistol rose with a great effort, seeming to lug itself upward against pressure, like a man walking through the sea. It cocked as it rose. The horse, startled by the movement, began to shy. The pistol, divining the shy before it started, moved of its own volition towards the right. It produced a mushroom of black smoke : no flash : and some time afterwards a loud report.

"The smoke had no effect upon Sir Marcus. The noise seemed to make him start.

"Mr. Hance peered at him through the powder, moving his head slightly to one side like an obstructed member of the audience trying to see better at the cinema. The baronet's face was the

same colour as the sand, and had a mixed expression of defiance and surprise. He remained upright, with his pistol at his side.

"Mr. Hance opened his mouth.

"Sir Marcus Izall began to look fatigued. He raised his pistol well away from the body, away from the seconds, away from the Squire. When it was pointing straight up into the air he pulled the trigger. Then, as if the second explosion had been too much for him, he fell flat on his back.

"Little Tommy saw it for the first time in his second's face. They had all run to Sir Marcus. The blood, squirting over the fine sand, had rolled itself into gritty pellets that looked odd. Little Tommy had stayed on his horse.

"They came back to him at last, and he read the message in a side glance, an evasion of the unhappy Captain's eyes. They were eyes of hostility and secret shame. Sir Marcus Izall was a dead giant. My great-grandfather was a broken dwarf, who had lost his status after all.

"He ought to have thought of it before. If Goliath had killed David he would have been the prototype of cads. It had been impossible for the bigger man even to take an aim."

CHAPTER TWELVE

There was a good deal of trouble on the sixth day. The Professor gave one of the hounds some beer, and it was afterwards sick in his pocket. Facey and Soapey had a quarrel about the mechanical horse. Then the old Etonian, who seemed to have lost consciousness and had certainly refused all but liquid nourishment since the end of his story, suddenly sat up and threw his boots at the canary. The Countess accused Pansy of cheating at Snap. Mr. Marx, who had been left to look after it, burnt the celery soup.

Immediately after dinner the Professor said, "Listen, we've had stories about hunting and flying and shooting. I think we ought to have a fishing story to round them off. Does anybody know one?"

Nobody did. This was exactly what the Professor wanted.

"I know a fishing story," said the Professor, assuming a diffident expression.

"But you've told a story already," said Mr. Marx. The Professor simpered in his white beard.

"I don't mind stepping into the breach," he said.

"Poor dear," said the Countess, "he wants to tell it very much. I suppose we shall have to listen."

"You see," said the Professor, "fishing is, after all, the greatest of the sports."

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"How can you have the patience!" exclaimed Pansy.

"There!" cried the Professor, leaping on to his hobby horse and galloping off in all directions, "There! That's the first remark that every imbecile makes. Every fool that doesn't fish seems to think that fishing consists of sitting on the bank with a float, and a bell on the end of the rod! Fishing, the greatest, most difficult, most arduous, most hair-raising of the sports: the sport which I shall give up last of all as my income dwindles: the sport which mellows the heart, sharpens the senses, whets the appetite, exhausts the body, and trebles the intelligence: the sport which nobody will ever master and which is beyond the endurance of any but the blest: the sport which combines the timing of a cricket stroke with the wisdom of Solomon and the training of a Marathon runner and the sympathy of W. H. Hudson and the blood lust of Tarzan of the Apes: the only sport which can make cabinet ministers drum upon their breasts in the waste lands of the Hebrides: for this pentecost I am informed that I require patience, and am offered commiseration! Excuse me while I laugh."

"There were the Rands," continued the Professor, after laughing, "who quarrelled about a cutlet on their honeymoon and did not speak to each other for forty years: at least, they only spoke before company. They were the good old stock who preferred to keep up appearances. Rand was a master of the Cuthindown. His wife saved his hounds for him, by whipping them

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off the railway line within sight of the Flying Scotsman. He took off his hat. She drove after him, with the right kind of shot, when he had walked five miles towards the butts without any cartridges. He gave her a glass of sherry. But once, when he had left his gaff a mile up the river, it was she who ran for it and lifted his forty-pounder out at the first shot, and then he folded her to his bosom, exclaiming, 'Emily, my only love.'

“I was fishing,” said the Professor, “at Edin-dalloch, in 1907, when I made my record catch. The castle had been lent to me, and I was alone in it, for it was the fishing that I wanted and not a lot of harum-scarum with ladies in comic skirts and photographs in the weekly papers. As a matter of interest, I may say that I once met a retired major who used to insist upon having two gillies to follow him up the bank (with all his paraphernalia he needed them, I must say) and who used to hand his rod to the first gillie, as soon as he had fished a pool, for the man to reel it in. There was something great about that major. He used not even to look round. He would finish a pool quite abruptly and hold out the rod to one side. If the man did not jump to take it, he would simply let it go, and then it would drop. Meanwhile he walked off to the next pool. I often wonder whether he didn't have somebody to chew his food for him as well. Perhaps he bought Bengers.’

“ I had the castle to myself, living in two rooms of it, and fed by the keeper’s wife at morning and evening. I could only spare a fortnight and meant to make the best of it. I used to get up at half-past six, so that I could be fishing at eight o’clock ; and I used to knock off at eight-thirty, dine at nine, write up a fishing diary with my eyes drooping in my head, and tumble into bed, asleep already, at half-past ten. By jove, that was the way to sleep ! You lost consciousness to the sound of running water, and woke to it : the quick, brown water of Scotland, nothing like our own slimy canals. It was April, Aprile as the keeper Watt used to call it, and there had been two spates. The second was going down. There was plenty of water, but the gravel was beginning to show in the burn : red. Granite, heather, peat ash. I wonder why rose to purple is the national shade ? Is Scotland rich in iron ? Even the little wrens. You used to wake up to the sound of the red water, and perhaps to a couple of blackbirds singing like nightingales.

“ I had always intended, when I got really rich and old, to buy Edindalloch. One has to have these dreams. It would have brought the lairdship of a beautiful but barren countryside, in which the crofters slaved all day at the little farms and then went back in the evening to plough their own holdings. They seemed to have no amusements, only relaxation. There was not a cinema or a public-house within seven of the most desperate

miles ; and if there had been, they would not have had the money to afford them. When they were not working they sat in front of the fire, doing nothing, reading nothing, and not speaking. No wonder they hung up texts, and believed in the devil. Bare moors, few neighbours, a but-and-ben. Were they wildly religious or fiercely immoral ? How did they get rid of themselves ? No doubt they were warlocks in secret, but that of course I was not let into. In my gushing southern way I used to give them Good-night ; but they never answered. I was a foreigner and a feudal lord, their enemy, and they had the sense to treat my vapid overtures with silent contempt. I soon got used to this, and enjoyed it. When I was the laird of Edindalloch I should have to be a wicked laird. They would understand and love me for it. I should have to eat the children of my tenants in the shape of a werewolf, and hunt the tenants themselves across the moors, at night time, with black mastiffs. It would make very little difference to them in any case : their life was already insupportable. I should have to be ninety years old, my nose would have to meet my chin, and I should have to hunt my hounds out of a bath chair drawn by Shetland ponies. I intended to wear a huntsman's cap, a plaid shawl, and an ear trumpet. I should also have waved an ebony walking-stick with silver knobs. All the spring and summer I should have fished and sung. In the early autumn, and till the

very 12th of December, I should have shot my moors. In the grand long winter nights I should have sat over a peat fire in the tower room, practising witchcraft and tying flies. The aged Laird of Edindalloch, upon being asked in 1955 to what he attributed his long and happy life, would have replied : Young man, I have always obsairved two rules, (a) I have never resisted temptation ; (b) I have always sharpened me hooks with a carborundum. And then, when I was dead at last, they would have buried me, with sincere regret, in a bend of the river : like Colonel Leslie. I had an odd and senseless desire not to be cremated. It would have been much more sensible, dignified, and pleasant for the mourners ; but I wanted to be buried low down, in the nook of a salmon river. There I should have been able to hear impalpably the waup and the sand-piper, and the less lovely noise of the plover. The water could have flooded over me if it liked, and I could have felt the big fish running up near, and I could have rotted and been fertile without upsetting people by draining down the hillsides. The cemeteries there are in the lowest valleys. All this is unintelligent, but it was the feeling of Edindalloch.

“ Well, there I was in the latter half of Aprile, with the river in grand order, as near to heaven as any man in the United Kingdom. The Brown Hill was over against the tower-room, with a line of butts just discernible, and beyond the heave of

the Brown Hill rose the mighty shoulder of the Groamach. The snow lay in the folds like sugar icing on the top of a plum pudding.

“ The twenty-third of Aprile was a good day for salmon ; that is to say, a day almost insupportable for human life. The east wind blew up the valley, bringing a variation of snow and sleet. It was in the days before I had discovered that the only sensible form of headgear is the twa-snooted-bonnet, and I was wearing a cap. I wore it back to front, in a vain effort to keep the rain out of my neck, and it made a cold poultice on my forehead from which the water trickled down the sides of my nose. My fingers had long passed the stage of having any feeling at all, even the awful rasping feeling of cold wet deer’s-fat. I often wonder how many casts an earnest salmon-fisher makes in the course of a blank day. I had been fishing since eight o’clock and it was now about six. Knock an hour off for my whisky and sandwiches in the middle part of the day, and I daresay I had cast about seven hundred times. Seven hundred times I had controlled my sopped and frozen muscles to time a cricket pitch of line half across the east wind ; seven hundred times I had worked my fly in a wide arc across the ripple, for about forty-five seconds, and raised it to the surface, and taken a pace down the bank, and tried again. If virtues have to be talked about, the salmon fisherman’s is not that of patience but of endurance. In any case

the label is ridiculous, for I had been blissfully happy, trembling with anticipation, at every cast. Virtues are generally things by which unpleasant matters are supported. In that case the fisherman has none.

“For, you see, it was a reasonable day for salmon. The big spate was over, and had taken with it the kelts. It had settled down sufficiently for one to feel that the fish had stopped running up, were resting, and would take if the lure were right. The sleet that was now coming down might fetch some more water from the hills ; and this would mean either blank days in the future, or, if it was only a slight rise, a glorious hour when the fish woke up and prepared to run again.

“I was alone at the Crooked Pot. I have never been fond of having gillies hanging about, for they fuss me by tying on my flies (I never trust them to keep on) and if I can’t gaff out my own fish I had rather not kill it. The laird had told Watt to look after me, and he had kindly come down on several occasions, to teach me the river. Now that I knew it, I wanted to be alone. On the other hand, we particularly wanted a fish to send to the laird ; so I had asked Watt to fish as well, each starting at opposite ends of the Edindalloch water and meeting at the Mill Pool when it was time to knock off. I was alone at the Crooked Pot.

“In spite of the snow and the sleet, in spite of the east wind and the deer’s-fat on my line, it had been

a lovely day. All fishermen's days are lovely. I had seen two gooseanders, four oyster catchers, two teal, and one sand-piper, beside the usual plovers and partridges. The gooseanders looked rather like the oyster-catchers, in their marking at any rate, and the oyster-catchers made the same sort of noise as the sand-piper. The primaries of the plover buckled to the wind like the tawse of a brogue. The pine clumps on the moors had dead trees in them, like the badger bristles on an old tramp's chin. A grouse said 'Talk.' All the beautiful things in the world had been crowding about me, and all the lovely things happening to me, and I had been in health to appreciate them. I had caught a tiny lamb, only a few days old, which was too cold, wet, and miserable to notice me coming up behind. I just stroked and scratched the crisp curls on its little back, and then its mother frightened it by saying Baa ! in an anxious voice. It got up and staggered off, till its mother sniffed where my hand had been and gave me a cold crofter look. Later on, in a slight lull, all the lambs were playing in the opposite fields : absolutely lovely. Thirteen or fourteen of them charging up and down their special playground, whilst a nannie sheep looked on, like a nurse in a poem by Blake. They ran races, all together, butted each other, and occasionally made tentative efforts to mount. The fields opposite me were leading a full life of their own. I saw fifteen white hens and a cock walking along with the wind

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behind them and their tails over their heads, like a bustle of Victorian beauties at a boisterous Ascot. Then there was a man ploughing with a horse and a cow yoked together, the latter walking with a bored and pansified gait that defies description. Finally there had been a farm horse who had fallen down and couldn't or wouldn't get up. The whole family of his owner (three men, one woman and two boys) stood around him, slapping him, pushing him, pulling him with ropes, and placing his hoofs in suitable positions for getting up. He may have been bewitched, or he may have been suffering from a nervous breakdown consequent upon the conditions of labour in that part of the country. But the stupid expression which he put on, and the fact that he got up perfectly easily when they had slapped him enough, point in another direction. I had been watching from the other side of the river, and when he did get up I clapped. This made them all dourly furious, except the youngest boy, who was delighted.

"Well, well. I expect this beauty bores you to tears. You want my story, and don't give a pin for the glories of just being alive.

"I was alone at the Crooked Pot, wondering whether Watt had had any luck and rather hoping that he hadn't. I am proud to say that I have always been a jealous fisherman. Watt was a lovely person, a fine salmon man and a perfect companion, with the best fount of humorous stories that I've

come across. They were the kind of stories that went with the sousing wind, with sitting on a game bag in an inadequate mackintosh, and eating a drenched sandwich made of that faintly mouldy bread which seems to be a speciality in Scotland. It is not really mouldy. On the contrary, it is pure. That is what makes it taste mouldy to our adulterated Southern palates.

“They were the kind of stories that went with the river bank ; and the sound of the ripple ; and the view of one’s boots ; and perhaps the consciousness of two black-backed silver superlatives lying beside one, covered with handfuls of grass, so that the herons should not interfere with them when we were further up the river.

“I remember him describing a heron fishing. It stands with its neck stretched right out, and its head on one side. Then it makes a dart.

“‘Once,’ he would say, ‘I was gillie to a gentleman who was a bad fisherman, and verra short sighted ; but he enjoyed it. I recollect that he one day fishit the whole of the Ardgalleys with his fly caught in the knee of his ain plus fours. He could hear the line splashing into the warrter, and that kept him happy.’

“‘But why,’ I asked, ‘didn’t you tell him?’

“‘Ah,’ says Watt, putting his finger by the side of his nose, ‘t’was safest there.’

“And then there was the story of the gillie he had known at Aboyne : an excitable man, devoted

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to the Fish. This gillie was attending upon a lady whom he suspected of being a gomeril. She hooked a fish and there was a struggle which was too much for his nerves. He became excited, and, upon the fish making a dash at the rod, was observed to rush backwards up the bank, meanwhile beckoning to the lady's hinder parts and exclaiming in an agonised voice, ' Airse this way, mum ! Airse this way ! '

" That was the kind of story-teller my keeper was, God bless him, and those were the kind of hours we spent by the river bank, watching the indigo water with grey scum, on bad days, and the clouds on top of Groamach.

" But I really must get back to the Crooked Pot. It was a pool at a right-angled bend of the river, with the deep pull on the near side. The other bank was not in our fishing, but belonged to Blairglassie. It was my favourite pool, although it was not by any means the best for salmon. It had a high bank on one side, and a general beauty unlike that of the other pools. Also, it had to be covered in spring by means of a series of intersecting arcs that had a geometrical interest. I never had a fish out of it, though I took an over-confident trout of seventeen inches.

" I was using the Bulldog, a lure for which I would lay down my life without hesitation. If you had been on the top of the high bank, you would have seen him steadily darting and pulling below

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you, a cross between cobalt and the yellow of corn, breasting the current in a way that almost made you want to leap in and bite him yourself. Wickham and Greenwell may have invented certain inferior flies, but I attribute the Bulldog directly to the Holy Ghost.

“ I was fishing the Crooked Pot, with a tricky wind-eddy occasioned by the right angle to contend with, and a gorse bush in the high bank behind to catch my fly. My subconscious mind was probably counting busily, ONE, TWO, AND three : though why the ‘ three ’ was there I am at a loss to say, since I brought the rod forward on the ‘ and.’ ‘ Three ’ marked the entry into the water : and there it went, with an audible plop, and the gut cast making a dead-straight inaudible hiss behind it. The line came round in a belly which you couldn’t avoid, because the ripple was on the near side, and the lure came after it transversally, moving across and slightly towards you. In the very point of the right angle there was a bit of a miniature bay, generally covered with froth, and it was hereabouts that I imagined the deepest part of the pool to lie. It was there, incidentally, that I had my trout of seventeen inches. I used to draw my Bulldog across it, alongside the main current, with a vague hope that something might follow up the ripple. As usual at the moment of hooking a salmon, I was not expecting it.

“ It was a startling pull. You know the firm pull

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of the usual fish, the determined outrage premeditated on your lure, as if it was a small boy that he was holding down to spank. There is nothing flashy about it, no jerk or bang ; only the majestic *possession*, unlike the grab of a trout. And you know the almost unbelieving heart-throb with which you strike back at him, and the ‘ Got you, you—— ! ’ and the slowly regal motion with which he begins to sail the pool, only the line cutting the water, himself far down and out of sight.

“ The present pull was curiously different. There was the trout’s jab in it, and then a sort of elasticity. When I struck, which I did with enthusiasm, I might have struck the bottom : except that it actually drew away from me instead of coming. After that there was a split second in which both of us did nothing from astonishment. The fish was the first to move. It went off downstream, like a speedboat, giving a sort of wriggling or wringing motion to the line. I made a futile effort to reel in, and the rod instantly bent double, springing one of its split-canes with a ghastly report. You can imagine that I began to run like a gazelle.

“ The first part seemed to be the worst. I can’t be sure. Everything was terrible. You know, if you get a salmon on a trout rod, he gets the sulks and the whole thing eventually becomes a bore. There was nothing of that in this. I was into

something which I couldn't bring to gaff, but it never left the move. The first part was the worst from the mountaineering point of view. I had to run up a slippery path on the steep bank, with the line down to the backing. Then I had to run down again, and jump on to the Island in the hope of stopping him in the pool. It was a jump like that of William Tell, or whoever it was in the Swiss legend, for the water was high. I made one attempt to reel in, but the rod began to touch its toes. I could feel the sprung cane beginning to crunch, and leapt again, off the other end of the Island, which was a bigger jump than ever. I felt as if I was going to suffocate.

“The sweep below the Island Pool was easier and gave me time to think : nearly time. I sprinted along the level bank, reeling in until I had got the backing on the reel again. Life had become a question of backing. There was nothing about the fish or the gut cast or the line : only a sprung rod, and a lot of backing that was either on or off the reel—generally off. Apart from this, there was the question of stiles and bridges.

“I did have, however, a little time to recollect myself. Why did the fish go downstream, and what earthly fish of this calibre could there be at Edindalloch ? We used to reckon thirteen pounds a good spring fish. Could it be foul hooked ? I had no time to answer any of these questions. All I could say was that I appeared to be into a fish of

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more than forty pounds, which was impossible, and that it was taking me downstream as if it was trying to drown *me*, which was worse. Then I devoted myself to jumping the first stile.

“In the Mill Pool, by the grace of God, the creature decided to stop. I couldn’t have stopped it myself, and if it had gone on I should have had to take to the water. There was a high cliff further down which would have put me out of action, and then a farm house and a bridge. Not that I wouldn’t have taken to the water. I should certainly have done so, whatever the hopes of success.

“The creature decided to stop. Then, instead of cruising round the pool, it sat down in the middle. It was the most unnatural thing. It simply stayed in the middle and played at Give and Take. It was as if somebody had taken hold of my fly in his hand and was pulling it towards him, then allowing it to come back to the stretch of his arm. At the fully returned position he was like solid rock, at the other end slightly elastic. And of course I couldn’t see anything. There had been a rusty silver flash below the Island Pool, and that was all. It was at this moment that I was able to get a glimpse of my watch.

“Then I remembered that the gaff was stuck in the bank at the Crooked Pot.

“Almost at the same moment the creature got tired of Give and Take, and started off on the return journey. We were down to the backing in

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no time, in fact almost quicker than before, and there I was, a demented creature, with a sprung rod, a line almost off the reel, no gaff, and a supposed fish of something over forty pounds that could swim for half a mile downstream.

“ This time I didn’t trouble to jump on to the Island. I ran past it at full speed. I also ran past the gaff, because there was no time to look for it. The line all the time kept up this mysterious twitching and shaking, and an erratic elasticity between limits of about a yard. We passed the Crooked Pot at a hand gallop, I had a distorted view in the shallow rapids below the lower Ardgalleys, and then we went through the whole stretch of them, lower, middle, and upper, to the Top Pool. The creature was not a slave to sporting boundaries. It took me for another mile into the Blairglassie waters, then turned, and rushed past me downstream, causing a surface wave like a torpedo boat destroyer.

“ I fell into the Top Pool, because a stone turned over under my foot, but kept hold of the rod and was running again in a flash, this time with no backing left at all. In the Upper Ardgalley I recovered some. In the middle one I was snagged, but came loose by a miracle. Opposite the Lower Ardgalley I fell into a rabbit hole. The rod went on down the bank and then into the river, but I cut it off and caught it floating and the creature was still on. It must have been somewhere about

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this time that I began howling for Watt. But he was far away.

“ Reaching the Crooked Pot for the third time, I managed to snatch the gaff, stumbled, but kept going. He went round the Island Pool four times, giving me time to get back to the line. Then we set out for the Mill Pool. I cantered madly round the big bend, took the low wire fence like a hurdle, stuck the gaff between my legs, and fell flat on my face.

“ It was the end. I got up as quickly as I could and ran to the rod. The line was slack. Instead of that magnificent energy, shaking to and fro, there was a coil of line floating on the surface : instead of the sprung arc, there was a straight rod : instead of my extreme excitement, emptiness. One pulls a tug of war with Fate, and Fate lets go.

“ On some occasions when losing fish I have whimpered out loud : but this was far too sore for that. I looked in a stupid way at the end of my rod ; and then, in silence, began to reel it in.

“ The line came in oddly. As I picked it up, it seemed to float upstream. The fish was on.

“ It must have stopped as I fell, and was cruising the pool. I leave you to imagine the ecstasy with which my heart performed a backward somersault inside me, and the feverish haste with which I tightened up, and the clutching fear in case the hold had loosened. I was contending with all these agonies, simultaneously, when the fish came

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at me across the pool. I was too surprised to reel in or to run backwards. It came straight at me, stopped at the bank, and stuck its head and shoulders out between my legs."

"It was a mermaid," said the Professor.

Pansy said, "I knew it would be something of the sort."

"But what you will never know," replied the Professor, "is what the mermaid said."

"What did she say?"

"Allow me," continued the narrator, "to tell the story in my own way. It was a mermaid, but a sorry one. The tip of her nose was blue with cold, and she had a drop on the end of it. Her cheeks had fallen in, her hair was dank, and her expression of exasperation and despair would have softened the heart of a sterner man.

"*"Αφες," she said, 'ὦ βδελυρώτατε, τὸν ἐμὸν δάκτυλον.*

"Ἦ γενναῖα κόρη," I replied at once, 'συγγνώμην σε αἰτῶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ ἀμαρτήματος.'

"We stared at each other uncomfortably.

"The mermaid was the first to continue. She said, 'Well, for Gawd's sake, take it out quick.'

"It was a difficult situation. You see, she must have weighed at least eighty pounds. And yet I hardly liked to gaff her.

"*"Are you going to take the bloody thing out of*

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my finger, or aren't you?' enquired the mermaid.

"I said, 'If you will kindly come out on the bank, like a nice young lady, I shall be delighted to do what I can.'

"'No bank for this young lady,' said the mermaid, showing signs of being off.

"I nervously tightened the line, causing her to shriek with vexation. The Bulldog was firm in her middle finger.

"'You dare!' she exclaimed, making as if to bite my leg.

"I hastily withdrew, fingering the gaff.

"'And don't you try to stick your trident into me,' she added, 'or I'll scratch your eyes out, that I will.'

"One didn't even know whether there was a close season for mermaids, or if one put them back like kelts.

"'Look here,' I said, 'I can't possibly take it out unless you come on the bank. What on earth possessed you to catch hold of it at all?'

"At this the poor creature broke down.

"She said, 'Oh, dear, it's all too awful! I didn't ought to cry, I know, but there it is. It comes of hearing one's native tongue, I think, and that after all these dreadful weeks in this too hideous place. I suppose I'm just a silly girl, and it's all a punishment, really; but there, it do seem unmerited, and me always the one to mind my p's and q's, and friendly with Poseidon and all the best in the sea,

dining out at bachelor parties with the deepest among the lower ten. Gawd, if I could catch that salmon what did me dirt. And then the cold, and the rocks to bump yourself against, and all these damn silly fishes that are strangers in these parts themselves. Nothing but bruises and starvation, and the temperature below what you would keep a dory in. Not without being persecuted.'

" 'Come, come,' I said, 'my dear young lady. You must just climb out on the bank and trust yourself to me.'

" 'You gentlemen,' wailed the mermaid, 'you always say the same. And how is a poor girl to know?'

" I haughtily drew myself up to my full proportions and replied,

'Πῶς ἂν καλὸς καὶ γαθὸς συγκατακέοιτό τινι πτερύγια ἐχούσῃ;'

" 'That may be so,' said the mermaid, 'but a girl can't be too careful.'

" I realised that the moment had come when she would have to thaw, and waited without speaking.

" 'Well,' said the mermaid doubtfully, 'no cuddling, mind.' And she climbed out on to the bank.

" Few can realise the struggle that took place inside me at that moment. On the one hand there was her weight, which would certainly have been a record for the Deveron, and then there was the fact that I was probably the only living man who

had ever caught a mermaid. On the other hand lay her feminine figure and pitiful distress. Even if I could have summoned Tommy Watt, who must have been a mile away, it would have been impossible to get my story credited by the world without producing the exhibit. Even if Watt had been there to swear to it, they would have locked us both in an asylum, instead of one. To be sure of immortality I would have to reverse my gaff and beat her brains out with the heavy end.

“Of course it was impossible. Apart from the questions of close seasons and kelts and whether eighty pounds might not turn out to be quite an insignificant weight for a mermaid after all, apart from all this there were her brains. One can’t beat people’s brains out. One can’t take the thick end of a gaff to something which is a lady from the waist up at any rate.

“The only other course would have been to keep her alive. But think of the difficulty. She herself would have struggled to prevent it, and Mrs. Watt would certainly have been scandalised. And then, what does one do with mermaids when one has got them? Imagine being saddled with half a fish for life! She might have even expected me to take her back to the Mediterranean.

“No, there was nothing to be done. I thought quickly, and I thought correctly, and I cut the Bulldog out of her middle finger with my knife. She was not an easy patient.

“ I can’t remember very much more. I tried to get her story, but it was confused. She sat there on the bank with her teeth chattering and her sharp nose with the drop on the end of it, and shrieked whilst I cut at the barb.

“ ‘ Aow ! ’ she exclaimed. ‘ You’re doing it apurpose ! ’

“ She wept a good deal. I remember a confused babble about the waters from which she had originally been seduced, and how the Bulldog had looked so blue and yellow, reminding her of Capri and the Isles of Greece, and how she had only stretched out her hand to play with it, but it had pricked and struck and bitten back at her. It hurt her most when she pulled against it, so that she lacked the courage to sit down and pull it towards her, taking it out with the other hand. She had tried this once, in the Mill Pool, but it had hurt too much. Besides, it was firmly in. All this came out, muddled up with a lot of stuff about never trusting a man, and Proteus, and the Nereids, and what old Triton would say when she got back home.

“ When it was finally out, she asked me the way to Seriphos. The poor child had an idea that if she only went on long enough up stream she might have come to the Pierian or the Arethusan springs : which would have been something at any rate. She had lost all sense of direction, couldn’t tell her left hand from her right, and was unconscious of any measures except the fathom :

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which was no good to me. So you can imagine it was a difficult job. Finally I suggested that she had better wait for the tunny and follow them. It would have been a dreary wait, but I understand that they ought to have taken her as far as Land's End, and there she might have recognised a sea mark. Anyway, she went. I often wonder whether she got home, and what they said to her.

"She slipped into the Mill Pool, wiping her nose with the back of her hand, and snuffled, and began to swim away. It was only then that I realised what a chance I had missed. Think of all the things one could have found out from her, all the living knowledge of classical antiquity that was swimming down the Deveron.

"I shouted, but she would not stay. I ran down the bank, but she was swimming fast. By a tremendous effort I reached the Linbane bridge ahead of her (she was having a rough time with some rocks and a dead tree) and yelled down into the water as she passed :

" 'What song,' I hollered, 'did the Sirens sing, and what name did Achilles assume when he hid himself among women?'

"She only waved.

"She only turned her hay-feverish face towards me, with a look of gratitude and deluded sex appeal. Then, in the high neighing voice of a battered barmaid, she began herself to sing. The notes floated up to me with diminishing poignancy,

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as she turned into the good trouting stretch by Shandy Taff, made an occasional splutter as she swallowed a mouthful of grey water by Pirrie's Bank, vanished finally in a flurry of Groamach snow.

“ ‘ Whatl Aye do,’ she sang,

“ ‘ When yew

“ ‘ Are far

“ ‘ Awaie

“ ‘ And Aye

“ ‘ Am blew

“ ‘ Whatl

“ ‘ Aye

“ ‘ Doo-oo-oo-oo ? ’ ”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Your fishing story," said Mr. Marx, "reminds me of another, equally impossible. My father, Sir Hastings Utterwood, used to tell it at children's parties."

"Nonsense," remarked Mr. Romford. "How can yer father have been called Utterwood?"

"I changed my name."

"Mr. Marx," said the Countess, "ran away from home when he was fourteen, rather than go cub hunting with the Burstall."

Mr. Marx explained hastily that this was before he met Miss Springwheat.

"Tell the story," said the Professor.

"My father," said Mr. Marx, "used to say that an experience like the one I am about to relate was apt to shake one's interest in mundane matters. Naturally he did not expect to be believed, and he did not mind whether he was or not. He did not himself believe in the supernatural, but the thing happened, and he proposed to tell it as simply as possible. It was stupid of him to say that it shook his faith in mundane matters, for it was just as mundane as anything else. Indeed, the really frightening part about it was the horribly tangible

atmosphere in which it took place. None of the outlines wavered in the least. The creature would have been less remarkable if it had been less natural. It seemed to overcome the usual laws without being immune to them.

“ My father was a keen fisherman, and used to go to all sorts of places for his fish. On one occasion he made Abisko his Lapland base, a comfortable railway hotel, one hundred and fifty miles within the Arctic circle. He travelled the prodigious length of Sweden (I believe it is as far from the South of Sweden to the North, as it is from the South of Sweden to the South of Italy) in the electric railway, and arrived tired out. He went to bed early, sleeping almost immediately, although it was bright daylight outside ; as it is in those parts throughout the night at that time of the year. Not the least shaking part of his experience was that it should all have happened under the sun.

“ He went to bed early, and slept, and dreamt. I may as well make it clear at once, as clear as the outlines of that creature in the northern sun, that his story did not turn out to be a dream in the last paragraph. The division between sleeping and waking was abrupt, although the feeling of both was the same. They were both in the same sphere of horrible absurdity, though in the former he was asleep and in the latter almost terribly awake. He tried to be asleep several times.

“ My father always used to tell one of his dreams,

because it somehow seemed of a piece with what was to follow. He believed that it was a consequence of the thing's presence in the next room. My father dreamed of blood.

"It was the vividness of the dreams that was impressive, their minute detail and horrible reality. The blood came through the keyhole of a locked door which communicated with the next room. I suppose the two rooms had originally been designed *en suite*. It ran down the door panel with a viscous ripple, like the artificial one created in the conduit of Trumpingdon Street. But it was heavy, and smelt. The slow welling of it sopped the carpet and reached the bed. It was warm and sticky. My father woke up with the impression that it was all over his hands. He was rubbing his first two fingers together, trying to rid them of the greasy adhesion where the fingers joined.

"My father knew what he had got to do. Let me make it clear that he was now perfectly wide awake, but he knew what he had got to do. He got out of bed, under this irresistible knowledge, and looked through the keyhole into the next room.

"I suppose the best way to tell the story is simply to narrate it, without an effort to carry belief. The thing did not require belief. It was not a feeling of horror in one's bones, or a misty outline, or anything that needed to be given actuality by an act of faith. It was as solid as a

wardrobe. You don't have to believe in wardrobes. They are there, with corners.

"What my father saw through the keyhole in the next room was a Troll. It was eminently solid, about eight feet high, and dressed in brightly ornamented skins. It had a blue face, with yellow eyes, and on its head there was a woolly sort of nightcap with a red bobble on top. The features were Mongolian. Its body was long and sturdy, like the trunk of a tree. Its legs were short and thick, like the elephant's feet that used to be cut off for umbrella stands, and its arms were wasted : little rudimentary members like the forelegs of a kangaroo. Its head and neck were very thick and massive. On the whole, it looked like a grotesque doll.

"That was the horror of it. Imagine a perfectly normal golliwog (but without the association of a Christie minstrel) standing in the corner of a room, eight feet high. The creature was as ordinary as that, as tangible, as stuffed, and as ungainly at the joints : but it could move itself about.

"The Troll was eating a lady. Poor girl, she was tightly clutched to its breast by those rudimentary arms, with her head on a level with its mouth. She was dressed in a night-dress which had crumpled up under her armpits, so that she was a pitiful naked offering, like a classical picture of Andromeda. Mercifully, she appeared to have fainted.

"Just as my father applied his eye to the

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keyhole, the Troll opened its mouth and bit off her head. Then, holding the neck between the bright blue lips, he sucked the bare meat dry. She shrivelled, like a squeezed orange, and her heels kicked. The creature had a look of thoughtful ecstasy. When the girl seemed to have lost succulence as an orange she was lifted into the air. She vanished in two bites. The Troll remained leaning against the wall, munching patiently and casting its eyes about it with a vague benevolence. Then it leant forward from the low hips, like a jackknife folding in half, and opened its mouth to lick the blood up from the carpet. The mouth was incandescent inside, like a gas fire, and the blood evaporated before its tongue, like dust before a vacuum cleaner. It straightened itself, the arms dangling before it in patient uselessness, and fixed its eyes upon the keyhole.

“ My father crawled back to bed, like a hunted fox after fifteen miles. At first it was because he was afraid that the creature had seen him through the hole, but afterwards it was because of his reason. A man can attribute many night-time appearances to the imagination, and can ultimately persuade himself that creatures of the dark did not exist. But this was an appearance in a sunlit room, with all the solidity of a wardrobe and unfortunately almost none of its possibility. He spent the first ten minutes making sure that he was awake, and the rest of the night trying to hope that

he was asleep. It was either that, or else he was mad.

“It is not pleasant to doubt one’s sanity. There are no satisfactory tests. One can pinch oneself to see if one is asleep, but there are no means of determining the other problem. He spent some time opening and shutting his eyes, but the room seemed normal and remained unaltered. He also soused his head in a basin of cold water, without result. Then he lay on his back, for hours, watching the mosquitoes on the ceiling.

“He was tired when he was called. A bright Scandinavian maid admitted the full sunlight for him and told him that it was a fine day. He spoke to her several times, and watched her carefully, but she seemed to have no doubts about his behaviour. Evidently, then, he was not badly mad : and by now he had been thinking about the matter for so many hours that it had begun to get obscure. The outlines were blurring again, and he determined that the whole thing must have been a dream or a temporary delusion, something temporary, anyway, and finished with ; so that there was no good in thinking about it longer. He got up, dressed himself fairly cheerfully, and went down to breakfast.

“These hotels used to be run extraordinarily well. There was a hostess always handy in a little office off the hall, who was delighted to answer any questions, spoke every conceivable language,

and generally made it her business to make the guests feel at home. The particular hostess at Abisko was a lovely creature into the bargain. My father used to speak to her a good deal. He had an idea that when you had a bath in Sweden one of the maids was sent to wash you. As a matter of fact this sometimes used to be the case, but it was always an old maid and highly trusted. You had to keep yourself underwater and this was supposed to confer a cloak of invisibility. If you popped your knee out she was shocked. My father had a dim sort of hope that the hostess would be sent to bath him one day : and I dare say he would have shocked her a good deal. However, this is beside the point. As he passed through the hall something prompted him to ask about the room next to his. Had anybody, he enquired, taken number 23 ?

“ ‘ But, yes,’ said the lady manager with a bright smile, ‘ 23 is taken by a doctor professor from Upsala and his wife, such a charming couple ! ’

“ My father wondered what the charming couple had been doing, whilst the Troll was eating the lady in the nightdress. However, he decided to think no more about it. He pulled himself together, and went in to breakfast. The professor was sitting in an opposite corner (the manageress had kindly pointed him out), looking mild and short-sighted, by himself. My father thought he would go out for a long climb on the mountains, since exercise was evidently what his constitution needed.

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“He had a lovely day. Lake Torne blazed a deep blue below him, for all its thirty miles, and the melting snow made a lacework of filigree round the tops of the surrounding mountain basin. He got away from the stunted birch trees, and the mossy bogs with the reindeer in them, and the mosquitoes, too. He forded something that might have been a temporary tributary of the Abiskojokk, having to take off his trousers to do so and tucking his shirt up round his neck. He wanted to shout, bracing himself against the glorious tug of the snow water, with his legs crossing each other involuntarily as they passed, and the boulders turning under his feet. His body made a bow wave in the water, which climbed and feathered on his stomach, on the upstream side. When he was under the opposite bank a stone turned in earnest, and he went in. He came up, shouting with laughter, and made out loud a remark which has since become a classic in my family, ‘Thank God,’ he said, ‘I rolled up my sleeves.’ He wrung out everything as best he could, and dressed again in the wet clothes, and set off up the shoulder of Niakatjavelk. He was dry and warm again in half a mile. Less than a thousand feet took him over the snow line, and there, crawling on hands and knees, he came face to face with what seemed to be the summit of ambition. He met an ermine. They were both on all fours, so that there was a sort of equality about the encounter, especially as the ermine was higher-

up than he was. They looked at each other for a fifth of a second, without saying anything, and then the ermine vanished. He searched for it everywhere in vain, for the snow was only patchy. My father sat down on a dry rock, to eat his well soaked luncheon of chocolate and rye bread.

“Life is such unutterable hell, solely because it is sometimes beautiful. If we could only be miserable all the time, if there could be no such things as love or beauty or faith or hope, if I could be absolutely certain that my love would never be returned : how much more simple life would be. One could plod through the Siberian salt mines of existence without being bothered about happiness. Unfortunately the happiness is there. There is always the chance (about eight hundred and fifty to one) that another heart will come to mine. I can't help hoping, and keeping faith, and loving beauty. Quite frequently I am not so miserable as it would be wise to be. And there, for my poor father sitting on his boulder above the snow, was stark happiness beating at the gates.

“The boulder on which he was sitting had probably never been sat upon before. It was a hundred and fifty miles within the Arctic circle, on a mountain five thousand feet high, looking down on a blue lake. The lake was so long that he could have sworn it sloped away at the ends, proving to the naked eye that the sweet earth was round. The railway line and the half-dozen houses of Abisko

were hidden in the trees. The sun was warm on the boulder, blue on the snow, and his body tingled smooth from the spate water. His mouth watered for the chocolate, just behind the tip of his tongue.

“And yet, when he had eaten the chocolate—perhaps it was heavy on his stomach—there was the memory of the Troll. My father fell suddenly into a black mood, and began to think about the supernatural. Lapland was beautiful in the summer, with the sun sweeping round the horizon day and night, and the small tree leaves twinkling. It was not the sort of place for wicked things. But what about the winter? A picture of the Arctic night came before him, with the silence and the snow. Then the legendary wolves and bears snuffled at the far encampments, and the nameless winter spirits moved on their darkling courses. Lapland had always been associated with sorcery, even by Shakespeare. It was at the outskirts of the world that the Old Things accumulated, like drift wood round the edges of the sea. If one wanted to find a wise woman, one went to the rims of the Hebrides ; on the coast of Brittany one sought the mass of St. Secaire. And what an outskirt Lapland was ! It was an outskirt not only of Europe, but of civilisation. It had no boundaries. The Lapps went with the reindeer, and where the reindeer were, was Lapland. Curiously indefinite region, suitable to the indefinite things. The Lapps were not Christians. What a fund of power they

must have had behind them, to resist the march of mind. All through the missionary centuries they had held to something : something had stood behind them, a power against Christ. My father realised with a shock that he was living in the age of the reindeer, a period contiguous to the mammoth and the fossil.

“ Well, this was not what he had come out to do. He dismissed the nightmares with an effort, got up from his boulder, and began the scramble back to his hotel. It was impossible that a Professor from Abisko could become a troll.

“ As my father was going in to dinner that evening the manageress stopped him in the hall. .

“ ‘ We have had a day so sad,’ she said. ‘ The poor Dr. Professor has disappeared his wife. She has been missing since last night. The Dr. Professor is inconsolable.’

“ My father then knew for certain that he had lost his reason.

“ He went blindly to dinner, without making any answer, and began to eat a thick sour-cream soup that was taken cold with pepper and sugar. The Professor was still sitting in his corner, a sandy-headed man with thick spectacles and a desolate expression. He was looking at my father, and my father, with the soup spoon half-way to his mouth, looked at him. You know that eye-to-eye recognition, when two people look deeply into each other’s pupils, and burrow to the soul ? It usually

comes before love. I mean the clear, deep, milk-eyed recognition expressed by the poet Donne. Their eyebeams twisted and did thread their eyes upon a double string. My father recognised that the Professor was a troll, and the Professor recognised my father's recognition. Both of them knew that the Professor had eaten his wife.

"My father put down his soup spoon, and the Professor began to grow. The top of his head lifted and expanded, like a great loaf rising in an oven ; his face went red and purple, and finally blue ; the whole ungainly upperworks began to sway and topple towards the ceiling. My father looked about him. The other diners were eating unconcernedly. Nobody else could see it, and he was definitely mad at last. When he looked at the Troll again, the creature bowed. The enormous superstructure inclined itself towards him from the hips, and grinned seductively.

"My father got up from his table experimentally, and advanced towards the Troll, arranging his feet on the carpet with excessive care. He did not find it easy to walk, or to approach the monster, but it was a question of his reason. If he was mad, he was mad ; and it was essential that he should come to grips with the thing, in order to make certain.

"He stood before it like a small boy, and held out his hand, saying, ' Good-evening.'

" ' Ho ! Ho ! ' said the Troll, ' little mannikin. And what shall I have for my supper to-night ? '

"Then it held out its wizened furry paw and took my father by the hand.

"My father went straight out of the dining-room, walking on air. He found the manageress in the passage and held out his hand to her.

" 'I am afraid I have burnt my hand,' he said. 'Do you think you could tie it up?'

"The manageress said, 'But it is a very bad burn. There are blisters all over the back. Of course, I will bind it up at once.'

"He explained that he had burnt it on one of the spirit lamps at the sideboard. He could scarcely conceal his delight. One cannot burn oneself by being insane.

" 'I saw you talking to the Dr. Professor,' said the manageress, as she was putting on the bandage. 'He is a sympathetic gentleman, is he not?'

"The relief about his sanity soon gave place to other troubles. The Troll had eaten its wife and given him a blister, but it had also made an unpleasant remark about its supper that evening. It proposed to eat my father. Now very few people can have been in a position to decide what to do when a troll earmarks them for its next meal. To begin with, although it was a tangible troll in two ways, it had been invisible to the other diners. This put my father in a difficult position. He could not, for instance, ask for protection. He could scarcely go to the Manageress and say, 'Professor

Skål is an odd kind of werewolf, ate his wife last night, and proposes to eat me this evening.' He would have found himself in a looney-bin at once. Besides, he was too proud to do this, and still too confused. Whatever the proofs and blisters, he did not find it easy to believe in professors that turned into trolls. He had lived in the normal world all his life, and, at his age, it was difficult to start learning afresh. It would have been quite easy for a baby, who was still co-ordinating the world, to cope with the troll situation : for my father, not. He kept trying to fit it in somewhere, without disturbing the universe. He kept telling himself that it was nonsense : one did not get eaten by professors. It was like having a fever, and telling oneself that it was all right, really, only a delirium, only something that would pass.

"There was that feeling on the one side, the desperate assertion of all the truths that he had learned so far, the tussle to keep the world from drifting, the brave but intimidated refusal to give in or to make a fool of himself.

"On the other side there was stark terror. However much one struggled to be merely deluded, or hitched up momentarily in an odd pocket of space-time, there was panic. There was the urge to go away as quickly as possible, to flee the dreadful Troll. Unfortunately the last train had left Abisko, and there was nowhere else to go.

"My father was not able to distinguish these

trends of thought. For him they were at the time intricately muddled together. He was in a whirl. A proud man, and an agnostic, he stuck to his muddled guns alone. He was terribly afraid of the Troll, but he could not afford to admit its existence. All his mental processes remained hung up, whilst he talked on the terrace, in a state of suspended animation, with an American tourist who had come to Abisko to photograph the midnight sun.

“The American told my father that the Abisko railway was the northernmost electric railway in the world, that twelve trains passed through it every day travelling between Upsala and Narvik, that the population of Abo was 12,000 in 1862, and that Gustavus Adolphus ascended the throne of Sweden in 1611. He also gave some facts about Greta Garbo.

“My father told the American that a dead baby was required for the mass of St. Secaire, that an elemental was a kind of mouth in space that sucked at you and tried to gulp you down, that homœopathic magic was practised by the aborigines of Australia, and that a Lapland woman was careful at her confinement to have no knots or loops about her person, lest these should make the delivery difficult.

“The American, who had been looking at my father in a strange way for some time, took offence at this and walked away; so that there was nothing for it but to go to bed.

“ Sir Hastings Utterwood walked upstairs on will power alone. His faculties seemed to have shrunk and confused themselves. He had to help himself with the bannister. He seemed to be navigating himself by wireless, from a spot about a foot above his forehead. The issues that were involved had ceased to have any meaning, but he went on doggedly up the stairs, moved forward by pride and contrariety. It was physical fear that alienated him from his body, the same fear that he had felt as a boy, walking down long corridors to be beaten. He walked firmly up the stairs.

“ Oddly enough, he went to sleep at once. He had climbed all day and been awake all night and suffered emotional extremes. Like a condemned man, who was to be hanged in the morning, my father gave the whole business up and went to sleep.

“ He was woken at midnight exactly. He heard the American on the terrace below his window, explaining excitedly that there had been a cloud on the last two nights at 11.58, thus making it impossible to photograph the Midnight Sun. He heard the camera click.

“ There seemed to be a sudden storm of hail and wind. It roared at his window-sill, and the window curtains lifted themselves taut, pointing horizontally into the room. The shriek and rattle of the tempest framed the window in a crescendo of growing sound, an increasing blizzard directed towards himself. A blue paw came over the sill.

“My father turned over and hid his head in the pillow. He could feel the domed head dawning at the window and the eyes fixing themselves upon the small of his back. He could feel the places physically, about four inches apart. They itched. Or else the rest of his body itched, except those places. He could feel the creature growing into the room, glowing like ice, and giving off a storm. His mosquito curtains rose in its afflatus, uncovering him, leaving him defenceless. He was in such an ecstasy of terror that he almost enjoyed it. He was like a bather plunging for the first time into freezing water and unable to articulate. He was trying to yell, but all he could do was to throw a series of hooting noises from his paralysed lungs. He became a part of the blizzard. The bed clothes were gone. He felt the Troll put out its hands.

“My father was an agnostic, but, like most idle men, he was not above having a bee in his bonnet. His favourite bee was the psychology of the Catholic Church. He was ready to talk for hours about psycho-analysis and the confession. His greatest discovery had been the rosary.

“The rosary, my father used to say, was intended solely as a factual occupation which calmed the lower centres of the mind. The automatic telling of the beads liberated the higher centres to meditate upon the mysteries. They were a sedative, like knitting or counting sheep. There was no better cure for insomnia than a rosary. For several years

he had given up deep breathing or regular counting. When he was sleepless he lay on his back and told his beads, and there was a small rosary in the pocket of his pyjama coat.

“The Troll put out its hands, to take him round the waist. He became completely paralysed, as if he had been winded. The Troll put its hand upon the beads.

“They met, the occult forces, in a clash above my father’s heart. There was an explosion, he said, a quick creation of power. Positive and negative. A flash, a beam. Something like the splutter with which the antenna of a tram meets its overhead wires again, when it is being changed about.

“The Troll made a high squealing noise, like a crab being boiled, and began rapidly to dwindle in size. It dropped my father and turned about, and ran wailing, as if it had been terribly burnt, for the window. Its colour waned as its size decreased. It was one of those air-toys now, that expire with a piercing whistle. It scrambled over the window-sill, scarcely larger than a little child, and sagging visibly.

“My father leaped out of bed and followed it to the window. He saw it drop on the terrace like a toad, gather itself together, stumble off, staggering and whistling like a bat, down the valley of the Abiskojokk.

“My father fainted.

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“ In the morning the manageress said, ‘ There has been such a terrible tragedy. The poor Dr. Professor was found this morning in the lake. The worry about his wife had certainly unhinged his mind.’

“ A subscription for a wreath was started by the American, to which my father subscribed five shillings ; and the body was shipped off next morning, on one of the twelve trains that travel between Upsala and Narvik every day.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The seventh day was a day of rest ; and saw a good deal of trouble, because Mr. Romford said that mechanical horses ought not to be ridden on Sundays and Mr. Marx called him a reactionary. As the party was in the habit of taking turns of twenty minutes each during the mornings, everybody became involved, and Facey's challenge to have a fight was taken up in several directions. The old Etonian made confusion worse confounded by suddenly getting up and biting one of the hounds, and the Countess made things worse by suggesting that he might have given it hydrophobia. So they gave the hound a dose of whisky and it was sick again. At last the Professor resourcefully turned on a double dose of oxygen, and everybody sat down amicably after evening prayers (conducted by Facey, as a concession for letting them ride the horse) to listen to a story about fox-hunting which Frostyface was prepared to tell.

“Gentlemen,” said Frosty, coughing discreetly, “and ladies, I ought to have said. It is a hunt with the Scurry and Burstall that I am going to describe to you. The strangest hunt and the longest point that ever I was in. Mr. Puffington hunted them in those days, a connection of his late lordship's, in a

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remote way. His lordship's grandfather married a Jawleyford, and his great-aunt Amelia Jawleyford married a Puffington : so there was hunting in the family. The original Puffington used to hunt the Mangysterne country in the 'fifties ; not a very keen master by all accounts, but an amazing popular man.

" The old Miss Amelia was never really a fox-hunting woman, and nor was old Puffington a born master. Between them they migrated to London and had a large family in the safety of Belgrave Square. The eldest son went into the city and financed sock-suspenders. It was a paying thing, and the Puffington I am speaking of, the grandson, found himself with a convenient house in the Scurry country and a town house in Pont Street. He took after his grandfather and accepted the mastership of the Burstall. My own father sent me to him, as a second whip, when I was a young lad.

" Those were the days for foxes, as my lady and you gentlemen know, before the modern world was pupped : fat subscriptions, stout foxes, fences kept, and nothing to do but ride all day. It was before the niminy-piminy generation of motor cars to and from the meet, before the day of horse boxes and bath salts and changed for tea at four o'clock.

" It was my last hunt with the Burstall : because my father was ready to take me back, after my apprenticeship, to whip in for the F.H.H., and because nobody would believe the account which

I gave when I got home after it. They seemed to think I'd been drinking—as, indeed, I had. I was forced to lie out that night, at a public-house, and after what I'd been through, drinking seemed to be the reasonable solution. But I suppose I ought to begin at the beginning. Mr. Puffington was a generous master, mounting his hunt servants in the very best style, and I had a couple of horses for the meet at Wingfield Abbey, in their Saturday country. It was a grand scenting day, a little rain overnight and a cold air to fetch the smell out of the ground in the morning. The going was good ; not slippery, for the year had been a mild one ; and not holding, for it was early in the season and the summer had been fine. We had a nice dart to begin with ; not much of a point, only a mile and a half in fact, but a good four as hounds ran, and we did it in twenty minutes. Just at the end of this I came down at a post and rails. The horse was not really what I should have called a goer, and I fear that Mr. Puffington had been done over him. The rails were in a deep bottom, with a good sized ditch on the landing side. I saw this ditch as I was coming up to it, and put on steam as much as I could. The result was that we hit the top rail, for the horse was blown and never rose as much as he should have done. I have no recollection of what happened on the landing side. Somehow, I tore Mr. Puffington's flask off my saddle, which he used to like me to carry for him, and had to pick it up

whilst the others were waiting to come on. I also split my right hand on something, I thought a hoof, and the horse was going awkwardly in the next field. The Kennel huntsman held that he had struck himself behind. Fortunately that fox was rolled over within a hundred yards of his point, in another minute, and this gave me time to shake my head and find out where I was. It must have been about twelve o'clock. There was a bit of a palaver, with people casting up and fussing about, and amongst them came my second horse. I hadn't been intended to change over till late, but after I'd told the groom about my rails and moved the horse about in front of him, we decided to make the change at once. I had scarcely got my leg across the second mount, which was a cob-like chestnut up to Mr. Puffington's weight, when they were into a second fox out of Yardley's Spinneys. They took him quickly back into the spinneys; and out again, having been brought to their noses, on the far side of a ragged fence with an oxer on the one side and wire on the other. We could see across it perfectly, but it would have been lunacy to jump. The hounds came out of the spinney slowly and well together. They were half into the field, almost under the metaphorical shadow of the wire, when a grey creature, that looked like a cross between the Benicia Boy and a bear, jumped up amongst them. Personally, the first thing I thought of was a sheep dog. There was nothing to be done at all. The

master, who was hunting them, because the huntsman had asthma, was on the hither side of the wire with the field, and we whips had cleared off round the spinney. The grey creature just went straight away for a windmill on the skyline, and the hounds went after him, within a few yards, as soon as they had recovered from their surprise. The cry was amazing. The field all turned up the fence and went bucketing along for the nearest gate, which proved to be at the farthest corner of a big enclosure. After that there was no hope of stopping hounds.

"Gentlemen, I must not bore you with the details of the run; and in any case I couldn't, because I have forgotten the country. The important things about it were that our quarry ran practically straight and that I was the only person on a fresh horse. I don't suppose that you have ever hunted a wolf. He went away at a tremendous loping pace, a kind of wolf burst which brought the hounds back to scent within a couple of fields. Then he must have settled to a steadier gait, and he ran like a human being pursued—straight away from his pursuers."

"Like a human being," repeated Frosty meditatively, and the Professor handed him a cigar.

The Countess said, "I thought the last British wolf was killed in the eighteenth century, or something."

"Quite possibly, my lady," replied the huntsman.

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"But, my dear fellow," said Mr. Romford plaintively, "either yours was a wolf or it wasn't, and oi understand you killed it. You really must make up your mind. It makes a great difference, you know."

"It was difficult," said Frostyface, "to make up one's mind at all. Our quarry took us ten miles towards the North Sea, running parallel with the Thames, before half-past one. I can't pretend that it was a cracking hunt, not after the first half-hour. The hounds simply ran away from us. When we had properly settled down to it, and after I'd had time to think and realise that the sun was behind my back, I took to the roads with the master and a few others. After a couple of hours we merely took the nearest road that seemed to lead eastwards and more or less within reported sight of hounds. We went on at these at a goodish pace, but naturally a boring one. There were only five or six in it, and after two hours and a half there was only one objective; to retrieve hounds somehow or other before dark. Every now and then, but very rarely, we had a bit of country and soft going to make up for the eternal trot and canter along the roads. At four o'clock there was only the master and myself. He was in a temper and couldn't bring his mount to canter. I offered him mine, but he had worked himself into such a fury about the hounds running riot that he wouldn't listen to

anything likely to bring him into salutary touch with them. At the same time I had a faint suspicion that he had by now reached the stage when he preferred his home to his hounds. He simply told me to get along as well as I could and send him a wire from Dover if I caught them. Well, by now I was excited. Anything like a record is apt to excite a young man. So, although it was not enjoyable, and although my horse was beginning to fade, I set out on my travels with a rising heart. To be the only one up with the hounds on a historic run, perhaps on the most historic run of all ! And then there was the nature of the quarry : the last wolf in England. I wondered where on earth it had come from, and wished that it might not prove to be a menagerie creature or a pet. It seemed not to be in the best condition, or else I suppose it would have beaten us with ease, but it took us thirty miles. Then, just as it was beginning to get dark, the tide turned in our favour. Scent became burning before it failed, the wolf began to pack up, the tired hounds were drawing up to him, and I established contact with the pack for the first time that afternoon. He was still a good way in front of us, gentlemen, but he was beginning to be a tangible identity. I even winded him myself : a whiff of sour bread and stale bananas. I suppose I ought to have stopped the pack ; but he seemed just possible, and I was young. The glory of achievement went to my head."

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The huntsman paused to light his cigar with a trembling hand.

“ The thing comes back to me very vividly. The love and gratitude which I felt for my broad and striding chestnut ; the thrill and fear of the fading quarry and the fading day ; the sensation that anything might give at any moment, the horse, the hounds, the wolf or the daylight ; the indescribable agony of possibility. Well, everything went : almost within five minutes. First the scent gave out, just as I viewed the wolf. I went mad and lifted the hounds to view, as if I had been doing that sort of thing all my life. And they were as mad as I was, for they rallied to me as if I had always been the master, and followed where I madly capped them on and shouted. We came to view as the light failed, and the hounds raised a husky cheer just at the moment when my horse gave in. He stood still at a stile which I was trying to put him at, trembled and dropped his head. I left him where he stood, and ran after the hounds like a frantic man, with my spurs biting into my ankles. Then it seemed to get dark almost at a blow, and there was a village with lights in the windows, and a man with a lantern swinging by a barn, and a furious uproar from the hounds, varied by a melancholy cry. I found them by the barn wall, scrumming up against it like a wall game at Eton College, and two hounds seemed to be dead, and a

grey leg was cocked upwards above the heaving backs, which drew it to and fro in a terrific worry. The deep-chested savagery of their note was splendid in the lantern light, terrible, cruel I daresay, but true to kind. They chopped him with an exultant brutality, dragging his entrails, tugging with heads together and heaving shoulders and bloody mouths. But the awful thing, gentlemen, the thing which lost me my place with the Burstall when I reported it, was that the wolf was trying to articulate. Against the background of their full-throated ferocity there was a thin and guttural note, a human supplication, an enunciation on the borders of the English tongue. The werewolf's leg, gentlemen, that was cocked above the scrummage, turned pink, grew hairless, convulsed itself like a kicking frog's: and Challenger was trotting round the outside of the circus, with a hand of human fingers in his mouth."

The Professor said in a hushed voice, "Well, Frosty, you take the biscuit."

The huntsman touched his forehead with a pleased smile.

"It isn't," continued the Professor, "that I don't know how to loose the arrow a little on the far side myself. I could have told you quite a good story about the Hunt Cup at Cheltenham, in which Mr. Siegfried Sassoon ran a horse called Pegasus, that was dis-

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qualified because 'it was found to have wings. But after a werewolf, what's the use ?'

"For heaven's sake," said Mr. Marx, "let somebody else tell a story quickly, or we shall have the Professor maundering on again. I can see it in his eye."

"It isn't," said the Countess kindly, "that we object to your stories, but your voice is beginning to get a little on our nerves."

The Professor said wistfully, "I could tell you a good story about my first stag. He claimed to be the Monarch of the Glen, and to have met Landseer and the Prince Consort face to face. His tastes were a little old-fashioned, I admit, but they were sound in their way. He had come to have a tremendous veneration for Holman Hunt."

"Quickly," said the Countess. "Now, papa—somebody, please !"

"But it must be curious," protested the Professor.

"Whoy," said Mr. Romford reflectively, but with obvious determination not to be stopped, not even by wire, "oi suppose the curiosest thing that ever oi remember was a hunt with the Wytcherley under Timmy Hands. He was a nice fellar, but rayther the victim of circumstance. He suffered from an impediment in his speech which made him nervous and unsuccessful at critical moments, and he used to try to make up for this at other times, so that he was nearly always

in the wrong. Sometimes he used to assert himself, and look a fool, and generally he did not, with the same result. Also he was a single man. With a woman to look arter him he might have been a different person, but as it stood he was only a blustering master of hounds, that was laughed at a good deal behind his back. His language, what with the stutter and the sense of being slighted, was something terrible in the hunting field, and he had a face like a lobster. He was a victim of circumstance, and of a widow lady that owned the Puddle gorse, called Mrs. Robinson-Robinson-Meopham.

“ This Mrs. Robinson-Robinson-Meopham was a terror : you never knew what she would be doin’ next. It was in the days before the suffragettes (and, o’ course, she became one of them later on, and managed to stick a pin into the Duchess of Ulster when she was presenting an American lady at one of the courts, but that was all hushed up) and in spite of this she was a manly woman, and indulged in a lot of sports which were then considered to be unsuitable to the sex. She had a grouse moor in Aberdeenshire, and a tenderness for Timmy Hands.

“ Her first husband was a stockbroker who enjoyed the quiet life and rayther had the idea that if he lived in the country he would be able to get it. Oi think she married him by force, and in about a year and a half he found the line excessive. Oi

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never knew whether he died or ran away ; with Mrs. Robinson-Robinson-Meopham you got the idea that she was not perfectly certain either. The pace was too good to enquire.

“ Not that she was a flighty woman, or anything of that. She was simply a good goer. Besides being a suffragette and a first-class shot with the grouse, oi can remember her as a philatelist, and a Salvation Army lassie, and a publican, and a diabolo champion, and a Seventh Day Adventist, and a Channel swimmer. At one time oi believe she tried to be a bearded lady at a circus. She lives on a desert island just now, and only goes about at night, holding a candle. Poor Timmy was one of her passing whims.

“ Nobody ever knew what her whims were going to be, and Timmy least of all. He only knew that she hunted with his hounds, going like a virago in the first flight, with her hat over one ear and a thorn in the end of her nose. She had a hatchet face, of a uniform grey colour, and the country people would have laid down their lives for her, since the time she presided at a village feast, dressed as a houri of Bagdad, and hit the vicar over the head with a bottle of whisky for referring to her as Our Beloved Patroness.

“ Mrs. Robinson-Robinson-Meopham invited Timmy to shoot over her moors in the summer of '97. This was at the height of her passion for him, and Timmy went like a lamb to the slaughter,

without the vaguest idea of the complications. She proposed to him on the first night. Nobody knows exactly what happened at this interview, only Timmy came away in a muck sweat and was seen walking about the castle at two a.m. with a prayer-book under his arm, being mistaken by one of the maids for the ghost of James the fourth. Oi suppose the result must have been unsatisfactory to Mrs. Meopham.

“ Anyway, they went to the moors next morning, and the lovers were in adjacent butts.

“ Oi was not there, and the story is variously reported. There was something about cross shots, but it probably cut deeper than that. It ended with Mrs. Meopham chasing Timmy across the moors, firing barrel after barrel into his tail. She always used to use a pair of 28-bores, with which she could cut them out like a Grecian, no man better. Timmy only stopped to jump, and Mrs. Meopham only stopped to reload, and so they vanished into the distance, bounding over the parched grass and heather and granite stones.

“ She ceased to come out with his hounds in the season of '97-98, and forbade Timmy to draw her covert. This was a great loss to the Wytcherley, and everybody made efforts to smooth over the differences, but without result. Mrs. Meopham used to stand outside the gorse when the hounds were in the Friday country, banging a gong. She also managed to conceal herself in the minstrels’

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gallery at the hunt ball, and blew itching powder down the necks of the female guests, as they were announced, with a pea-shooter.

“ ‘That,’ as she remarked to her butler on returning home, ‘will give the hussies something to scrat themselves for.’

“ All this made a bit of a noise in the sporting world, and Mrs. Meopham received a number of congratulatory letters from members of the Anti-hunting League and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. She was also presented with a pair of fox cubs by a Miss Mangleworthy, a badger, two otters, and a boa-constrictor. The presentation put another bee into her bonnet, and she began breeding foxes in the gorse.

“ They were pretty little craytures. She used to foster-mother the little ones with milk out of a fountain-pen filler, and fed the whole pack regularly on the front lawn, at breakfast, luncheon and tea, summoning them with the gong. In the afternoons she used to take them out in rotation on the lead, six at a time, for a scamper round the village. After they had ceased to be cubs she used to let them out in the gorse, to fend for themselves if they wanted to. But nearly all of them stayed there for good, coming in to be fed with the others before the house. She had to start a poultry farm after a bit, and become a respectable buyer in the district, to keep up her supplies. It stood to reason that the foxes weren't going to go away, with the fat of

the land to live upon, provided free at the front door, and the Wytcherley hounds ravaging the neighbourhood, looking hungrier and hungrier every day. Indeed, the wild foxes began to come in as well as the tame ones, and the sweet musky stench in Puddle gorse was something that you could cut with a knife. As the Puddle menagerie prospered, the sport in the country began to go down. Even if they did happen to find a fox somewhere else, he always pointed his nose for the gorse, and there Mrs. Meopham would be, banging her gong and swearing like a two-year-old. She had a keeper on each side of her, with loaded shot guns, and the whips got quite sick of stopping the hounds within sight of Puddle. Naturally it was very bad for the hounds. The foxes took to the gong, like hounds to the horn.

“Mrs. Meopham enjoyed all this a lot, and eventually came to be quite attached to the foxes themselves, though in the first instance she had only done it to annoy. Meanwhile Timmy Hands got redder and redder in the face, and gave up going to Tattersall’s or Peterborough or even Ascot, because of the jokes that everybody began to make. He had his own dinner gong taken up to one of the attics, and installed an electric bell instead. The subscribers to the hunt got more furious every day, and the committee spent half its time having meetings, without being able to hit on a solution.

“This went on till 1902, when the infamous

Puddle hunt took place, two days before Christmas. Mrs. Meopham was a woman who was rarely ill, but during the winter of that year she was suddenly humiliated by mumps, and the doctors made her take to her bed. Oi was hunting on the 23rd December, and the meet was at the Orange Man, for Brock's coppice. It was a drizzly sort o' day ; not quite misty and not quite muggy, but moist. We felt chilly before we started, being conscious of our legs inside our boots and of the texture of our clothes, just as if we had been bathing in salt water and couldn't get dry. Oi broke moy general rule and had a big glass of cherry brandy before we started. The cherry brandy at the Orange Man is extraordinary cheap and not very alcoholic : you get a small tumbler of it for about eightpence. Anyway, we started off, feeling depressed and thankful to be moving, without giving the late-comers much law. Oi half wanted the coppice to be blank. It was that sort of day.

" We found a fox at once and he set us a tearing pace from the beginning. He was an outlier who jumped up before we had gotten to the coppice at all, and off we went with a tow-row and a hustle ; everybody taken at a disadvantage, and some still hopping in their stirrups at the Orange Man, and several grooms looking disconsolately for their masters who had not arrived, and a great bustle in the main street, and a dash of scarlet here and there, darting round the hemisphere in different direc-

tions, all looking absolutely certain of the line. Oi caught a glimpse of a pair of red tails on a grey hoss, jumping a post and rails by the corner of the coppice, and went arter them, reasoning with myself that people didn't go over stiff timber all of a sudden, without having some knowledge of the whereabouts of the fox. Oi was rewarded by a sight of the front end of the cavalry tearing downhill in an undecided wedge, that was spreading out as it reached Treddle's Brook. Some were for finding a bridge to the eastward, and some knew of a ford higher up, and some were going over. In most huntin' books and pictures you never come across a sizable piece of water but what there are five or six people in it. Moy own experience is that an immersion is rare, but that's beside the point. Oi naturally chose the brook, for oi couldn't see the hounds, and reasoned in the same way as I had over the post and rails. It was right again. We hustled over the brow of the hill in a tearing hurry, and got within sight of hounds in the neighbourhood of the mill. That, and the cherry brandy, had brought us into a muck sweat, so that the nervous chill and the rasping clothes were gone for good. So were the hounds, or nearly ; and o' course he was a straight-necked fellar, going in a beeline for Puddle. It was five miles off, but you could guess the thing at once, and a fine time we had of it, seeing the guess fulfilled. He ought to pass Moden Spinney on the left, and so he did. The next place

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would be the allotments at Pemberley, and so they were. After Bundle it was a certainty, and Timmy Hands was beside me, rolling his eyes like a negro crooner, and talking to God. The huntsman was lost, and both the whips. At any rate we couldn't see them with the hounds, in the rare glimpses that we got of them. It was a stern chase, and no mistake.

"From the ridge at Overleigh Cross Roads we saw them run slap into the gorse, and Timmy began to sing 'Abide with Me.'

"It was five minutes before we were there, and then the hullabaloo that met us was enough to have made a brave man lose his reason. Mrs. Meopham was in bed with mumps, and the two keepers had gone off to the Leader Arms, and the devil was amongst the tailors. Timmy just sat on his horse in a grey smoke, with the white scum on his bridoon rein, wringing his hands and howling. There were as many foxes in the covert as there were hounds. Here would be two hounds chasing a fox, and there would be two foxes cornering a hound, and the noise was a cross between a bargain sale at Harrods' after the war and an outbreak of canine hysteria at the Zoo. Every now and then a hound would dash out with a terrified expression, and a look at Timmy imploringly, and totter back again, shouldering the white man's burden. There were about eight foxes chasing Ravager round the outside in a clockwise direction, and the same

number of hounds taking a sandy vixen widder-shins. The two packs kept meeting in front of Timmy, and running slap through one another, like a musical ride, until the whole lot got jumbled up together and went tearing round and round without any definite objective, biting each other as they went. Sometimes a fox and a hound would come out simultaneously, and meet each other face to face, and give an agonised gasp, and beat it hell for leather in opposite directions. And once a dog fox came out running hard with all its legs, but not making much progress because Ringwood had it by the brush, and a small vixen had Ringwood by the tail. Timmy rated some of the hounds, and wept, and holloa'd some of them on, and blew long despairing blasts on his horn, but gave up in the middle with a tuneless hiccough. And then he got down and went into the covert with his whip, and occasionally he would smack a hound, and occasionally he would smack a fox, and in both cases they turned a frenzied eye upon him and snarled and ran between his legs. I lost sight of him for a moment, and then there was a crashing in the undergrowth, and he came out like a ballet dancer or a whirling dervish, pirouetting on his toes, and striking out behind him with his whip, at a fox that had him by the tails. His topper fell off and Bellman, who always had a sense of humour, came and dropped a bleeding mask in it, and then Timmy tripped over Bellman, and sat

down on the hound and the hat and the mask, and his tail came away like a topsail in a typhoon, and the main circus hove into sight and poured over the whole lot, and a vixen bit him in the nose as she passed. Timmy, I will say this for him, was a brave man ; for he got up again immediately, and rammed his ruined hat on his head, and took it off again to remove the mask, and gave a scream of rage, and dashed into the covert.

“ It was then that we heard the gong upon the lawn.

“ Oi have heard a large number of dreadful things, from the Zulu war cry at Isandula to the yell of the creditor in an Australian bank, but that gong would have beat them all. It began booming on the lawn beyond the covert, and there was a horrible lull as the foxes melted away, and Timmy began blowing his own horn pathetically, like a baby elephant looking for its mother. The hounds were demoralised, poor craytures, having never before been asked to hunt a superior quantity of foxes ; and they were accustomed to being whipped away and baffled when the gong began, and they had come to regard the whole covert as a sort of inferno. So, however much Timmy blew, the main part of them couldn't be got together, and some of them slunk away, and some of them came out and licked their wounds, and a few went to Timmy's melancholy tootings. But the gong went on.

“ And then there was a terrible crashing at the far side of the covert, and a trumpeting noise, and the gong came nearer, and Timmy shot out like a furtive rabbit with the face of a tallow candle. He kept blowing his horn in little toots, and gasping, and calling for his horse, and oi'm ashamed to say that oi withdrew to the side of the covert and put my horse in the ditch and watched from there. About a quarter of the hounds came out with Timmy, and the rest dispersed as oi had, and at any rate he reached his horse. Oi had thrown its reins over a gate-post before vamoosing.

“ Timmy reached his horse, and was into the saddle before Mrs. Meopham broke from scent to view. There was a final hurricane of snapping twigs and swishing undergrowth, and then there was Mrs. Meopham in a red flannel nightdress, with a man's tweed cap on her head, held on by a silk stocking under her chin. Her face was as big as a pumpkin and she was riding the hoss that pulled the garden roller, an old hunter that had been retired four years ago. Round her neck there was a cavalry bugle, with a dent in it, that her grandfather had picked up at Waterloo, and she held the gong-stick in her right hand, with the reins and the gong held high in her left. Occasionally she hit the horse with the stick, and occasionally she hit the gong, and the foxes came arter her in a beautiful pack, maddened by excitement and the desire for lunch.

“ Oi am not quite sure what it was that Timmy was afraid of : whether it was Mrs. Meopham herself, and her associations with a 28-bore ; or the fear of creating a scene and damaging fox hunting ; or the sight of leash after leash of foxes reverting to the habits of the wolves. In any case he scrambled into the saddle, and tooted to the shaken hounds once or twice, and set off for the kennels with one eye skewing over his shoulder. He had lost his hat again, and half his coat was gone, and Mrs. Meopham gave a view-halloo that turned my blood to water.

“ It was then that we had the real hunt of the day. Timmy was not on a fresh horse, and Mrs. Meopham was on a broken-down one, and the foxes and the hounds were a bit bewildered, and Mrs. Meopham in any case had to lead her pack instead of follow it. So the pace was what Timmy made it, a sort of paper chase. Oi got ashamed of myself arter they had gone a couple of fields, and felt oi ought to follow to prevent mischief, and joined in at the tail. What made it worse was that half the main cavalry, who had come round by the bridge over Treddle’s Brook, spotted me in the distance and joined in as well. It was seven miles to the Kennels, and we went in that order. First Timmy, with five couple of hounds ; then Mrs. Meopham ; then twenty brace of foxes ; then myself, with the bobtail of the field. The labourers stopped to cheer as we passed.

“ At first I thought of stopping to turn the field back, for the honour of the master, but then oi thought it would be better to carry on, for the sake of his safety. If he had had a fall, oi don’t know what she’d a done to him. One can’t have a master of hounds broken up by a pack of foxes in the cream of his own country.

“ Timmy gave us a splendid gallop, oi must say. First of all he started rayther wildly for Bundle, but he quickly made up his mind, and ran a ring round Overleigh Cross Roads, pointing for the Kennels. He was straight-necked arter that, and took us along at a rattling pace, particularly as Mrs. Meopham had managed to work the bugle round in front of her and contrived to give him a blast of it once or twice. There was the gong music to follow, instead of the cry of the hounds, and generally you could hear her swearing and prophesying, if you were within half a mile. They led us over some terrible places, in the first part, until they took to the lanes.

“ Neither Timmy’s horse nor Mrs. Meopham’s could go very well arter a couple of miles, and so they cantered along, a couple of hundred yards apart, each one making a burst in turn and enough noise to waken the gypsies. A good many labourers and foot people joined in as they passed, and a postman from Hoem holloa’d the master away as he turned across country for the last half-mile. Mrs. Meopham was perceptibly gaining,

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cheering the foxes on with a terrific screech. With the Kennels in sight they both broke into a gallop, the horses being as maddened as themselves, and it was only by the length of his brush that Timmy got into the yard before her, and vaulted off his horse, and slammed the kennel door behind him, with what was left of his hounds."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Sport," said Pansy seriously, on the eighth day, "is really a substitute for adventure. Do you remember our argument about the supernatural when we started? The modern world has materialised everything, and adventure has vanished with the ghost."

"There is something in what you say," said the Professor. "Sport is the civilised man's adventure. And that puts me in mind of a gentleman I met who went to Albania. . . ."

"But adventure," continued Pansy doggedly, "can sometimes still be had in its pure form. . . ."

"Exactly," said the Professor, beginning to talk very fast. "My friend who went to Albania . . ."

"What I have been trying to say," said Pansy in desperation, "is that you don't have to be a sportsman in order to get your thrills. Quite exciting adventures do still happen, though rarely, and I want my story to-day to be an adventurous story, with nothing to do with sport. I think we've had quite enough for the moment about hunting and shooting and fishing. We've had ghosts, and lunatics, and dwarfs, and werewolves, and trolls, and mermaids; but we haven't had a murder."

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"My!" *murmured the Countess.*

"I refer," said Pansy, "to the Capri murder of 1928."

"You'll remember that on Capri, at the time of the murder, there were surprisingly few trippers for the time of year. It took place just far enough into the Spring for the bathing beauties of the Piccola Marina to be causing scandal to the more mercantile population of the Marina Grande. Indeed, the only gentry on the island who were not more or less fixtures was a French couple on their honeymoon at the Hotel Grotte Bleue, and they spent nearly all of their time in their bedroom. Count Gopaphlasmagos was seen alive at nine o'clock in the evening, and found dead at seven o'clock in the morning, so that ruled out the daily visitors. He could not have been killed by a sight-seer from Naples, for the steamer had left before he died and had not come back until his body was discovered. But, in any case, it seemed quite clear at first that he could not have been killed by anybody at all. The body was lying in a room which only had one door and one window, and both were bolted on the inside. He had been shot through the head, so that the floor was fairly clear of blood, and the revolver lay by his side. The shot had been fired from close quarters, and, in view of the circumstances, the authorities found little difficulty in bringing in a verdict of suicide. With

the door and the window bolted, it seemed impossible to come to any other conclusion.

“The matter would have rested there if Ian Thompson had not been one of the regular winter population of the island. There was something mediæval in Thompson’s method of dealing with criminals, something almost Borgiastic. He had never been anything but a private detective, and that because it was his hobby, not his profession. He was the greatest detective of modern times, probably of any time. Murder was a kind of drug to him ; its detection and punishment a tremendous, a sadistic urge, rather similar to the excitement of the bull-ring. Naturally, he was not interested in ordinary murders, in the *crimes passionelles* which the world is wisely beginning to regard as matters of quite second-rate importance. On the contrary, they filled him with the deepest and most sulky despair. He could never interest himself in horrid cases. But sometimes, once in every few years, somebody would commit a murder with forethought : somebody would cremate the corpse in an ingenious way, or make it unrecognisable so that its identity could not be established, or succeed in spiriting away the weapon entirely. Then Thompson would bustle about with a boyish enthusiasm, and never go to bed. After two or three days his friend and confidant, Rupert Green, would find him asleep in his study at four o’clock in the morning, in front of

a gas fire (he was regardless of his health) and the problem would be solved.

“In person, Thompson was not a very striking figure. He had a long nose which drooped over his moustache, and a long moustache which drooped over his chin. It was stained with soup and tobacco. He was a chain-smoker, and much addicted to acrostics. Those who study the Sunday papers will remember the pseudonym of Poop which always headed the solutions. In dull times, when there was no interest in the current murders, he used to provide himself with this outlet for his ingenuity. He could solve the ordinary puzzles set in the evening papers, so long as they were even moderately difficult, at sight. He used to enjoy the evening meals with Rupert Green more than any other part of the day. It was an amusement to watch his companion struggling to decipher the cross-word puzzles. Sometimes they did a kind of anagram, and Thompson chuckled at his friend's attempts. Once or twice, when the anagram was childishly easy, Green would be the first to reach the solution. This used to put Thompson in a bad humour. Once, when the anagram was PRIM HUT, Thompson failed to do it at all. Since Green had done it in less than a minute, this created a situation of such difficulty that they had to separate for the week-end before Thompson could look him in the face again.

“Many people have wondered about this

curious ingenuity of Thompson's, and noted his inability to cope with the merely straightforward. Once a jealous superintendent at Scotland Yard even hinted that Thompson sulked and refused the easier cases because they baffled him. But of course this was just a piece of professional malice. Thompson's brain moved in regions superior to the banal. He was a Borgia, a comploter, a child of the Renaissance, with no other virtues except a power of observation and a memory so retentive that nothing once observed ever afterwards escaped it.

"Well, Thompson happened to be staying at his villa in Capri (the *Torré Tre' Venti*, properly speaking in Anacapri, and just next door to Edwin Cerio), when the murder—or suicide, as they thought it at the time—was committed. He knew Count Gopaphlasmagos pretty well, and hurried to the scene of the crime. The *podestà* was a friend of his, so he found no difficulty in gaining admission.

"Everybody remembers poor Count Gopaphlasmagos. He had never been a rich man ; but after all he was a Count, and made an addition to the resident nobility. It was nice to know that either he, or the *duca di Carracciola*, or the *duca di Cavallofaccia*, would be sure to be in Morgano's at one time or another every day. I used to know a cook who said he had been cook to the officers' mess which had harboured the *duca di Cavallofaccia* during the war. He said that the duke had

once tried to push him into the soup cauldron because the dinner was late. One rather believed the story, because the duke used to possess a little dachshund which he had trained to come back to his whistle even after he had smacked its face.

“ He used to smack its face, and whistle it back, and smack its face, and whistle it back, for hours on end in order to amuse his friends while they were having coffee in Morgano’s. That cook also claimed to have cooked for Compton Mackenzie, so he was a well acquainted man. He said that Mr. Mackenzie used to suffer cruelly from rheumatism, or it may have been something else, which kept him in bed a good deal. He said that Mr. Mackenzie used to lie in bed writing his books, and then, when he had a twinge, used to stop writing and give one or two screams, sometimes more, until the twinge stopped, and then he went on writing again as if nothing had happened.

“ But to get back to Gopaphlasmagos. Everybody knew him, and most people were ready to lend him money (he was undoubtedly a count; it was put down in the Almanach) for although he was poor it did not seem to have soured him as it had the duca di Cavallofaccia. Indeed, there was a general feeling that even Cavallofaccia ought to be kept going. This kernel of titled people gave a sort of solidarity to our southern façade, a *raison d’être* for meeting each other in the rather aimless way of island peoples ; and, especially, one felt,

it gave us an excitement in life—for a duke is a duke all the world over. So people lent to Cavallaccia too, just enough to keep him in Fair-island pullovers and rather outrageously English-Riviera costumes : plus-fours, and white shoes with brown toes. He out-Englanded England, and might have been one of those typical Englishmen who were supposed to be prevalent on the Continent at the end of the last century, dressed in check ulsters and Sherlock-Holmes hats, with an alpenstock clasped in their hands. He bore the same relationship to the Englishman of to-day as that legendary figure bore to the Englishman of his own era. Probably the duke really kept his dachshund only as a tribute to his anglophobia. Englishmen, he believed, kept dogs, drank whisky and suffered from the spleen. So he tried to do the same, and felt himself rather *dernier-cris*.

“ It will be seen from my description that I did not like the duke very much. I used to see a great deal of him at Morgano’s, sitting there with his great horse face between two *putane* from the mainland, but he never spoke to me. I never could get an introduction, and though I bowed often he never acknowledged me.

“ Fortunately, we did not have to lend him money for his mistresses. He never gave them any. They must have come to him for love, or more likely as a sort of *haut école* or finishing school in their education. There was a regular grand tour

and beaten path which had to be followed by ladies of this profession who wished to make good at it. The route went up and down, deviously winding through the capitals of Europe, beginning and ending in squalor at Naples or Marseilles. Somewhere on that route there stood out the landmark of the duca di Cavallofaccia—rather on the upward grade, before the climacteric—looked forward to by the débutantes who thought they would never, never reach it, and regretted reminiscently by their elders who wished they could get back again so far. *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamus in illis.*

“He used to keep them in the Quisisana : quite jolly girls some of them seemed to be.

“Gopaphlasmagos went about with Cavallofaccia a good deal, and used sometimes to come in for a sort of reversion to one or another of the débutantes. But he was a common little man compared with the duke, and only took them on because he was really attracted by them, seeming to be quite tied up with the particular one of the moment and to be enjoying himself very much. Cavallofaccia never seemed to be enjoying himself.

“Certainly there was a rather common touch about the Greek. He was a short man, to begin with, and wore clothes which were loud, without being distinctive like the duke’s.

“Well, what with loans and bridge-winnings and what he could pick up here and there, Count

Gopaphlasmagos managed to keep going in Capri society comfortably enough. He used to live at the Bristol, a hotel then rather of the second class when compared with the chilly splendours of the Quisisana. The latter was undoubtedly the most expensive hotel on the island, and doubtless deserved to be, but even with the Duke's young ladies it never seemed exactly *gay*, except on one occasion when the lift collapsed and broke somebody's leg. The Quisisana would never have suited Count Gopaphlasmagos. He was too breezy, and required the background of a more *family* hotel, almost of an *en pension*. Looking backwards and trying to recall the poor fellow's peculiarities, it is borne in upon one that he was really rather well suited by the Bristol. He was essentially an hotel man, affably inquisitive and ready to make friends easily, and easily to forget them. However, a feeling began to spread that a count ought not to have to live in the Bristol. It was felt that he ought to have a villa of his own, in order to keep up his position and the status of the island.

“The thing was not so difficult as it might appear to an untutored eye. Of course, the value of property on Capri was a hundred times greater than its value on the mainland ; but, for all that, villas in Italy, the ordinary kind, need not be exorbitantly expensive. On the mainland you ought to be able to have your own house, and a

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servant to look after it, at little over a pound a week. You could do it with food thrown in, if you were content with two rooms and no lavatory.

“ Somehow or other the Count got let in for a villa, and a site was chosen on the slopes of Monte Telegrafo. There was a little shanty already standing, with a bit of terraced vineyard and a well. It had two rooms, and the count felt that he would do very nicely in it if two more were added. In a warm climate one does not depend on corridors so much as one does in the north. You might have four rooms abreast of each other, with only one door in each, opening outwards on to a terrace. Communication between the rooms would lie along the terrace. If you were sitting in the living-room you might have to go out of doors in order to get to your bedroom next door.

“ This was rather what was to happen in the Count's villa. The two rooms of the shack already standing communicated with each other. These were to be the Count's own bedroom and the living-room. Then he proposed to build two more rooms, one on each side of this nucleus, for kitchen and spare bedroom. His servant would sleep in the kitchen. All four rooms lay in a straight line, with a terrace in front of it over which the vines grew, and a little roof garden from which you could reach over and pick nespoli off a tree by the side of the house. Monte Telegrafo is fairly steep, so the roof of the villa touched the side of the hill just as much

as the terrace did further down. Of course all the rooms were on one floor. When it was finished it looked like a little pink step let into the hillside.

“The view was really delightful. The villa overlooked my own garden, a little way down the same hill, so I know. In any case I used often to walk up with the Count whilst the building was still going on, to see how things were faring. He took a great interest in the progress, visiting the place every day and chatting with the workmen. There was one delightful lad, as brown as a berry and more beautiful than the best Greek, who played on a penny whistle during the lunch hour and held the other workmen spellbound. He used to play the ‘Torna a Surient’ with an unearthly melancholy. That and the view would be among one’s longest memories. At sundown, when the west was spread out for ever and ever over the sea, one could have sworn that Sicily was visible : could almost have traced the infinitely distant and fragile suggestion of Mount Etna. But it was a delusion. The furthest one could see, on even the clearest day, must have been Pæstum. But there were implications in the view which extended much further. It is something to be able to see the Apennines, and the plume of Vesuvius ; to be able to pick out a headland which just hides the tower in which the Duchess of Malfi was strangled, and to be almost convinced that that faint gleam of almost illusory yellow shone from the walls of the

golden Greek temple of Poseidon. Mentally one stretched from Rome to Stromboli in space and spanned nearly two thousand years in time. The Count, however, was not so interested in the outward prospect as in the bird's eye view which he obtained of the island. I saw him once or twice raking my garden from above with a pair of binoculars.

"The building went forward quickly. One does not get much architectural finish in the south—just stone and plaster, neither of them very durable—perhaps largely because the whole thing is so much more liable to be knocked down again in an earthquake, or a landslide, than things are in England. Also, there is not so much need for durability, for the hard conditions of rain, winter and frost, which we have to endure, are absent. In quite a surprisingly short space of time the place was ready for occupation. On the last night before he was to move in with his furniture, when the last pane of glass had scarcely been put in and the mortar and the putty still lay in the garden, Count Gopaphlasmagos paid his usual visit alone. In the morning they found his body in the spare bedroom.

"Rupert Green told me all about Thompson's researches many months after the thing had blown over. He was admitted by the Podestà within an hour of the discovery and was able to make an examination while the corpse was still *in situ*. Moreover he was able to isolate all the people

who had been inside the room since it was unlocked. There was Pepino, the Count's servant, who wore thin shoes ; two of those fascisti soldiers in green uniforms, looking like a couple of surly and overweening Robin Hoods—their boots were thick and nailed. And the Podestà himself. The floor was a veritable map, for it was thick with dust left by the builders.

“Thompson became very fussy, would not allow anybody inside the door, and walked about himself with the greatest care. He started making a diagram of the floor, showing how the footprints went, but soon gave that up, examined the window closely, and after thanking the Podestà went home at once.

“Generally when he was in the midst of an investigation Green used to find him secretive to a degree, so he made no attempt to draw him into conversation at luncheon. Thompson surprised him by referring to the subject himself in the most open way, and Green, taking heart, said smilingly that he supposed it was an obvious case of suicide. With the door and window bolted on the inside, and no chimney, it seemed a safe guess. The rooms in these villas are heated by pans of charcoal which can be carried to and fro, so that was why there was no chimney. Charcoal is used for cooking too, very often, and a convenient mode it is. You simply have five or six little open braziers let into a stone slab, and light a charcoal fire in each, one

for the fish, one for the soup, and so on as required. They are giving off their full heat within a minute of being lighted, and they go out again as soon as you stop feeding them, which you do as soon as you don't require them any more. You have to regulate your heat by fanning them more or less. The Hindus cook like this also.

"Thompson was delighted that Green should have fallen into the trap, and replied at once that it was an obvious case of murder.

"Green had been caught so often that he refrained from making any comment, and waited for Thompson to explain himself. This Thompson did, after taking a draught of red wine specially brought from Porgerola. He smacked his lips, took a deep breath of contentment, and said, 'What about the footprints on the floor?'

" 'Oh,' replied Green, 'but look at all the people who have been in there!'

" 'Exactly,' said the detective, 'I looked at them all. There was the mayor, there were the fascisti, and there was Pepino. Their tracks were quite distinct.'

"When he had made certain that Thompson would not go on without encouragement, Green said, 'Well?'

" 'There were no others.'

"After a bit Thompson said impatiently, 'Really, my dear fellow! Surely you understand English? There were no other footprints.'

“ ‘Then, I suppose,’ said Green, ‘nobody else had been inside.’

“ ‘My poor Green!’ exclaimed Thompson. ‘None at all. Not even the Count’s. Don’t you understand? The room had been carefully swept *after* the body had taken up its position.’

“ Thompson was now well settled on the subject, and he proceeded to give his friend the outline of his hypothesis. The first thing he had done after realising that the floor was innocent of positive clues—though heavy with the implication suggested by their absence—was to make a close examination of the window. The builders had only just put it in, and the putty was scarcely dry, yet there were no fingerprints—not even of the builders. The panes had been carefully wiped, and the catch of the window also. Lastly, in the dust of the floor, there was a faint hint of a path swept towards the window; two little lateral moraines of shavings and rubble which the broom had irregularly thrown to either side.

“ When he had established these facts, Thompson was pretty clear about the explanation. Gopaphlasmagos had been murdered with forethought. The murderer had swept the floor carefully all round the body and then retreated to the window, sweeping behind him as he went. He had climbed out of the window, wiping and dusting the sill after him. Then he had pushed away the still drying putty round one of the panes and taken it out.

He had closed the window and latched it through the aperture, being careful to wipe the latch and so on. When it was securely fastened, and after he had given the floor a last sweep with the broom, he reset the pane again, using the putty which the builders had left behind with their other materials. Finally he had wiped the window all over with his handkerchief. I forgot to say that he must have wiped the revolver too, and closed the dead man's hand about it, for the fingerprints found were those of Gopaphlasmagos.

“The next step in the investigation was to identify the murderer. This was not so easy. Poor Gopaphlasmagos was not the sort of man to have made enemies, and the usual motives were distinctly absent. You murder people, as a rule, either to get their money, or to prevent them getting your money, or because they have found out and are likely to make known something which you would prefer to remain hidden. A policeman recognises you as you are driving away with the loot from a burglary, and you shoot him so that he shan't be able to tell on you. That would come in the third category.

“It was clear enough that neither of the first two motives could have actuated the murderer in this case. The Count had not money to steal (the small handful of silver which he possessed was still upon him, together with his watch and rings), and was not the sort of man who would have been likely to

steal other people's. In fact he was a very honest man, who would have been more likely to report a misdemeanour than to connive at it. He was instrumental in having the German Hinterer expelled from the island.

"So it seemed that the murderer must either have killed for the third reason, or from some quite unusual motive, madness or suchlike. The only other likely thing to go upon was that the man seemed to have belonged to the Count's circle. He had probably been in conversation with the Count, perhaps going over the villa at his invitation, when the deed was done.

"Thompson made a list of all the people who went about with Gopaphlasmagos, and put a tick against all those who had something to conceal. His theory was that the Count had stumbled across some disreputable secret, perhaps even that the selection of the site for his villa—or at least something to do with the change of habitat on the very eve of which he had been slain—had put him in possession of it. His idea was that the man must have killed him to keep the secret safe. Well, he made the list, and I fear that most of the names had ticks against them. Thompson was an observant fellow, and could have told you a good many things about the inhabitants of Capri: except the one or two who knew how to keep their own counsel. Then he made unobtrusive enquiries into the whereabouts of these people on the night of the

murder. In fact he enquired into the alibis of all the people who knew the Count, just in case there might be somebody who not only had something to conceal but had hitherto succeeded in concealing it from Thompson. He even asked a few questions about me : but fortunately I had a very loyal young attendant who was able to tell him that I was safe at home all night. Really he was more of a friend than a servant, and we often sat together in the private little garden behind my house just as if there was no inequality between us at all.

“ So, in one way or another, Thompson thinned down the list until there were only a few names left. He cut out the acquaintances—I told you that the Count made friends easily and easily forgot them—leaving only two or three. One forgets who they were, exactly. There was Cavallofaccia, and Edwin Cerio, and Miss MacCormick the American, and E. M. W. Tillyard, the doyen of the English school at Cambridge, and there must have been others.

“ Cerio was on the list not because he had anything to conceal, but because he had no alibi for the night of the murder. Personally I don't think it could possibly have been he. He was such a fine figure and so delightfully Edwardian. One was reminded of King Edward in many ways. Physically he was much more like Sir Henry Curtis in King Solomon's Mines, and wore the same kind of clothes. But in other ways. His air of am-

bassadorial sportsmanship, disseminating goodwill among the peoples and perpetually making (one felt) diplomatic visits to Paris in a deer-stalker's hat. He treated us all with such charmingly good-humoured condescension and courtesy; was always so dressed for the grouse-moor in 1890; talked, since his mother or father (I forget which) was said to have been English, in such uniquely Edwardian phrases. He was such a stout and jolly man, too, with the sporting jollity of a late Victorian chic, that one could not help feeling like one of his tenants or a subject. He, of course, was the author of *Aria di Capri*; that delightful book in which occurs the remark that the native grown coral of Capri has deteriorated since the war, which put the German manufacturers out of trade.

"Miss MacCormick may have done it, but it was doubtful whether she had the wit. Thompson included her on the grounds of insanity. If the murder was not committed for a reasonable motive then he felt bound to include her among the possibilities. Who can tell what lies behind the brain which does not fit our own?"

"I never could quite make out where Miss MacCormick used to live. It was somewhere near the Faraglioni, on Punta Tragara perhaps. She was reputed to inhabit the only room of a small white house somewhere about sea-level. She once told me how she loved the view, and would look

at it for hours. 'So much sea,' she explained, waving her hands about as if they were waves.

"Poor little creature! I daresay her yearly income was not a hundred pounds. But still, she seemed happy. She must have spent quite two-thirds of it at Morgano's, for she was there every day and almost all day, sitting alone at a table with a cup of espresso, waiting for somebody to go over and talk to her. I can see her now, with her pantherish Russian-looking woven coat and the little girl's black felt riding hat with an elastic under the chin. She had a very mystic expression and used to enjoy being made much of. People realised this, and, since they were fond of her, used often to take their parties over to her table en masse. Then she would sit there, with perhaps one of Cavallofaccia's *putane* on one side of her and a German fraulein on the other, smoking a cigarette through a long holder, looking as pleased as punch and tremendously mysterious.

"She lived principally on salame and gin, which she used to buy for herself in the market-place and carry about with her until it was time to go home.

"Tillyard was the man I personally suspected. There must have been a great deal of murky detail in his past which nobody can ever get at. But still it is not nice to say things about people who are still alive, is it? especially with the law of libel as it is, and for all I know he may be a friend of yours. Why a man should always be trapezing about the

Continent when he has a comfortable home of his own in Cambridge, I don't know. They say that a guilty heart never lies in peace. One must always be up and wandering.

"When Thompson had narrowed down the field of inquiry to these and a few others there was nothing more to be done on the existing evidence. It was a case, evidently, for his mediæval ingenuity, and he set to work to plot with zest. At this point in the story I can go on from my own experience, for I happened to overhear a conversation between Thompson and Green which took place in Morgano's on the day which preceded the dénouement.

"It was the evening, and I was sitting in that little alcove where the loud-voiced lady and the Englishman who has the borzoi usually play bridge with their party. In the other corner beside the bar there was a game of scopa going on between two of the bank officials. I remember that when Thompson came in there was some dispute going on about the prima-era. I was playing a solitary game of chess, but the noise disturbed me, and I looked up as they entered. Miss MacCormick was sitting at the table just outside the alcove (there was a sort of right-angle of wall between the two tables) and Thompson came straight over to her and sat down. For some reason I rather shrank into my corner and he failed to notice me.

"He and Green sat down on either side of her,

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and I could hear them perfectly. I have often wondered what made me listen, but we are inquisitive people on Capri, having so little to talk about and so much time to do it in, and I daresay that may account for it. Thompson began by asking her if she had heard the news? Since she did not know what he was talking about, Miss MacCormick remained silent and looked mysterious. Thompson read her attitude correctly and went on to tell her (this was the first we ordinary people had heard about the suicide not being really a suicide at all) that Count Gopaphlasmagos had been murdered, and that he had found out all about it. He talked for some time and gave an outline of the evidence as he had unravelled it so far. Then he said that he possessed an infallible clue to the identity of the murderer, which he could not reveal to her at present. He said that he had not yet even put it to the test himself, and was as ignorant as she was who the miscreant could be. To-morrow, he said, would be the earliest moment at which he would be able to be sure. He said that he was conscious of the responsibility which weighed upon him, that it was a very curious feeling to know that he only was in possession of a secret on which a man's execution might depend. He expected that the murderer would give a king's ransom to know that he was so hot upon the trail, for, if he knew, he would take steps to murder him (Thompson) as well, and thus ensure the safety of his neck for ever.

He said that if he were killed that night no living soul would be able to bring the man to justice. And how easy, he exclaimed, it would be to murder such a person as himself after all ! The true murderer did not make an assignation with his victim, for the victim might have talked about it before he went. He did not send him letters appointing a rendezvous, for they might be left about. On the contrary, he simply studied his victim's habits and fitted the murder in to accord with them.

“ ‘ Suppose somebody,’ said Thompson, ‘ wanted to murder me. He would maintain a close watch of my movements for several days, would try to find out if I had any dangerous habits. As a matter of fact, I have. I go for a walk every evening to that little platform above the lighthouse on the Anacapi side of the island. I always go alone. What could be more easy than to wait for me there, to hold me in conversation on the platform, and, with one dexterous shove, to precipitate me into the abyss ? ’

“ The conversation went on for some time, but I scarcely followed it. I was thinking of those terrible cliffs, so much steeper, and higher, I believe, than the supposed salto di Tiberio. Timberio, as the natives call him. He was supposed to have had his slaves thrown from the precipice on the landward side of the island, whilst his sailors waited with oars at the sea-level to bang

what remained of them to death. It is a great shame that poor old Tiberius should be black-guarded in order to make Capri a centre of prurient attraction. When one considers that he was something like seventy years old when he was supposed to be holding his orgies ! But that salto di Tiberio ! I once took a photograph there, looking perpendicularly down on a couple of rowing-boats. The cliff is so high that the boats were invisible in the picture. And the salto is nothing to the cliff above the lighthouse at the other end of the island. There is a little platform with a rail round it from which one can look down. The very rail makes one feel a terrible urge to climb over it and drop. You see the Mediterranean frothing about below you—it can't be less than a thousand feet and it might be half as much again ; I'm a poor judge of distances—looking puny and insignificant. The noise scarcely comes up to you. The lighthouse is a child's toy. Half-way between the lighthouse and you, there are gulls. White dots, you can hardly see them. Everything slants away at the wrong sort of angle, a horrible inverted perspective which seems to make you lean out into the abyss. There could be no hope of anybody living who had once launched into that funnel of space.

“ When I next paid attention to my neighbours Thompson had left the table and was talking earnestly to Edwin Cerio at the other end of the room. I could not hear what he was saying. It was

not till many months afterwards that I had the story from Green's lips.

“Apparently Thompson's stratagem had been to tell each person whom he suspected the same things that he had told Miss MacCormick. He offered to each of them this really very simple and ingenious method of doing away with him, and convinced them that it was necessary by telling them that the next day would see the publication of the fatal secret. He proposed to take the accustomed walk and to arrest the first person who attempted to push him over. He was his own bait in the big game hunt, and refused to take Green with him, lest he should scare the game away. I did not realise this at the time, taking what he said to Miss MacCormick as being gospel truth. He took me in entirely. He was a most ingenious man.

“Unfortunately the fatal perfection of the murder scheme which he had invented worked against him. He was too great a detective to have presented his quarry with a fallible plot. It was a matter of professional pride.

“He was found next morning at the foot of the lighthouse cliffs, mangled almost beyond recognition. The body was wedged between two rocks, drawn by the bodiless waves. The tideless sea surged and retreated remorselessly : plucked at a soaked trouser leg with half-witted curiosity : withdrew with indifference. The foam flowers were reddened at the tips, just as they might have

been reddened nineteen centuries ago, by the legendary victims of Tiberius."

"And who did the murders?" asked Mary.

"Really!" exclaimed Pansy.

"You tell it so convincingly," said the Professor, "that I should almost like to knock you on the head."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea," said Mr. Sponge.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"One thing that worries me," said the Professor on the ninth day, "is how you happened to dig this shelter to begin with. It was very nice to find you here, of course, but how did it happen?"

"We had a sort of hunch," said Mr. Sponge.

"Do you mean to say," asked the Professor, "that you guessed there was going to be a war, and dug the thing on the off-chance?"

"Something o' that," replied Soapey.

"Wouldn't call it an off-chance," added Facey.

The Countess said, "Fancy our being caught, in the middle of a field, at the end of a hunt, absolutely unawares, whilst our fathers were waiting for it like bugs in a rug!"

"Whoy not?" said Facey.

"But I was in the very thick of it!" exclaimed Mr. Marx.

"Oi've been a horse-coper," said Facey, "and a bank manager, and a master of hounds. One gets an instinct for trouble."

"Fear so," said Mr. Sponge, nodding sadly.

"It reminds me," said the Professor, with a cautious and benevolent expression designed to mask his intentions, "of the friend of mine who went to Albania."

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But the Countess was too quick for him.

"Look out," she exclaimed, "Jacky is going to tell a story."

"Not if you don't want me to," replied the Professor, in an offended voice.

"Perhaps it would be better," said Pansy politely, "to discuss our intentions about to-morrow."

"You wouldn't like to hear the story," pleaded the Professor, "about the conducted tour that I went on in the Mediterranean, and how we turned up the Gorgon's head under a stone, and the trouble we had when they insisted on our showing it in the Customs?"

"No," said Mr. Sponge.

"Or there was the story," continued the Professor, "about Mr. Budgett, who came across the Last Trump in the British Museum when he was researching about scent, and nearly blew it at the Boxing Day meet, in mistake for his horn."

"You told that one three times," said Pansy, "whilst we were still at Woodmansterne."

"But it's a very good story," protested the Professor.

"It's far more important," said the Countess, "that we should decide what to do to-morrow, when we get out."

The Professor made a final effort before he would admit defeat. He said, "I was on a shooting party once, in a thunderstorm, and Zeus got mixed up in it. I shall never forget the hiding that he gave to Cerberus, when the unfortunate hound retrieved the wrong thunderbolt."

"Oh, shut up," said the Countess. "I want to know about to-morrow."

"Well, what do you want to know?"

"After all, we are starting a new world. What are we going to do?"

"Oi shall ask you," said Mr. Romford, "to all of you sit at this end of the dug-out, with the oxygen on. Then oi'll go hout in a gas mask, with the canary."

"It ought to be a dove," said the Professor, recovering his spirits.

"If the fowl is still alive arter an hour," continued Mr. Romford, "when oi've had time to look around, you're free to come and go."

"Preferably to go," said Mr. Sponge.

"Do you mean to say," exclaimed the Countess, "that we aren't going to stick together?"

"Facey and I," said Mr. Sponge, "are going to fly round the world, to identify surviving petrol dumps, crops, living beings in the desert places, and the possibilities of the planet."

"Personally," said the Professor, "I shall find a motor car and drive to Edindalloch. There I shall live on trout, salmon and grouse (if there are any), as I have always meant to do. Lucy, are you coming with me?"

"I suppose I shall have to," sighed the Countess.

"Pansy and Frostyface," said the Professor, "had better take the hounds, the chickens and the canary. They can take them to Devonshire and make experiments in cross breeding, for it is all we possess

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towards the replenishment of our fauna. It isn't much. I suppose the new race will have to be vegetarian, unless we live on fish and hounds and poultry. Anyway, there'll be enough tinned food in the cities to keep us going for several generations. Mr. Marx and Mary shall be Adam and Eve."

"We will meet," said the Countess, "every Christmas at Melton Mowbray, where we will tell each other our adventures, celebrate the survival of the human race, and hunt a drag on foot with Frostyface's hounds."

"Try to teach some of your chickens to fly," said the Professor. "I believe we could train them to be game birds even now."

The old Etonian sat up, and demanded, "What about me?"

"It shall be left to you," said the Professor, "to find out how they worked the wireless at Daventry, and we'll all go off with portable sets."

"There must be a lot of liquor," said the Member for Daventry reflectively, "maturing in the breweries and cellars. How lucky that they kept wines in cellars, where the explosives wouldn't reach."

"And every year," he continued in a dreamy voice, "it will get older and older, and there will be nobody in Daventry but me to drink it."

The last scion of a royal college smiled happily, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They looked funny, squatting in the gymnasium-grocery, and presided over by the moose. The Countess, whose hair was dressed in a bun that had for thirty years been acknowledged as the neatest in all the shires, seemed somehow to repeat the creature's snout. It may have been her bun, her backside, or her bust. Whichever it was, or even if it was all these, there was an opulence of curvature which linked the animate with the inanimate dust. The moose's nose drooped with a pondorous stolidity, vacant of speculation but vaguely menacing by reason of its bulk. The Countess, neat, workmanlike, yet undeniably buxom, sat under the moose ; so that the curves poured downwards to the floor in a series of volutes, vaguely reminiscent of an heroic composition by the painter Rubens. Around this central bloc, and tastefully accommodating themselves towards its grand design, were a series of minor arcs. There was Mr. Sponge's Roman nose, repeating itself in the Professor's ; Mr. Marx's black and curly hair, levantine or negro but definitely baroque ; Mary Springwheat's rosy cheeks ; Pansy's artistic cusp of flaxen hair ; the velvet semi-circle of young Frosty's cap. The picture was at unity with itself.

Nor was the unity confined to its spectacular value. There was a feeling-tone as well, and even more

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pronounced. In the haggard light of the unshaded electric bulb, the moose's slightly moth-eaten nose registered depression. It drooped. So did Mr. Rumford's audience. The droop was not static: it was a droop shot with twinges, a kind of nervous stupor, a Russian melancholy, diversified by St. Vitus. Mr. Romford was playing the flute.

Ten days had passed in darkness and artificial light, and, when the last recitation was over, there was nothing left to do. Mr. Romford stood on the steps of the ladder, under the trap-door, with gas mask and canary. This, like the rest of his long and seldom honourable life, was all in the day's work to him. He had shaken hands with the party, and kissed Soapsey affectionately on both cheeks. Now he raised the canary in a last salute and stumped up the ladder. The members of the symposium held their breath, crouched over the cylinders of oxygen.

"In an hour," said Pansy, as soon as the lid had closed, "we shall know."

"It has not," said the Countess, "been an unhappy time."

She looked about her sentimentally, and patted the mechanical horse.

"Shall I tell you one last story," asked the Professor hopefully, "just for old times' sake?"

He had taken her off her guard. The misguided woman nodded, and dabbed her eyes.

"I was a little boy," said the Professor, "when

they brought me home to England, and I have loved my country all my life. Pansy can go to the Continent if he likes, and I'm sure he enjoys it in his way, but in my case there is too little time for Britain. What is the use of seventy years? Life is intolerable if one loves one's fellow-men: but for the selfish philosopher it is better than heaven, and far too short. I should like to go to Italy and commit a murder: I should like to go to Albania and shoot a mountaineer. I would have time to enjoy these things if I could live to be a thousand. Unfortunately I must sleep with my fathers. And I shall die before I have had time to learn the fringes of my own island.

"I don't know why I love the place. It takes the soul somehow, with convictions. The shires have had to be my lovers, in the absence of anything else. Scotland, though without the fox, is heaven unadulterated: the greatest trial of my life took place in 1906, when I turned back from it at Penryth, compelled by the duty of a conscientious explorer, to sample the frilly miseries of the English Lakes. Gloucestershire burns in the affections as the county which combines the sports. You can hunt, fish and shoot there; and the beer is excellent; and architecture flourishes because the houses are made of the stone they stand on; and the tedium of too many trees and hedges vanishes; and man is rooted in his own earth, along with his stone walls and houses, growing out of the mother

to which he will return. Trout in the Colne, hares on the top of Cleeve, the publican called Happy, who keeps The Plough at Fairford, the love and courage of the civil wars : it is the history of England, twining about one's heart. Then there is the black list : renegade Sussex, unhealthy with trees and trippers and the bawling of the Belloc school ; the pretty populated parts of Devonshire, self-conscious and debased ; the Lake district itself ; Surrey and the home counties, more suffering than sinful ; and the environs of towns.

“ It comes down to a question of sport. One can put it in hundreds of other ways, but the sport carries it best. Look at Sussex ; where can one really hunt or fish ? At Devonshire ; the trout are small, and they chase the hedgeless stag. At the Lakes, mainly coarse fish and whited sepulchres like John Peel. At the home counties and the towns—well, I mean to say. Look at the anæmic, miserable, myriad faces of the London streets. I was last forced to go there in 1907, but refused to stay the night. You could diagnose their horror at a glance. It was the lack of sport.

“ Talking of sport, I shall tell you of an interview which I had when I was a boy of twelve. I was learning to fish, in one of the counties on my black list, in a river four feet broad, where nobody troubled to suspect the trout. He was a beauty if he was half a pound.

“ It was a stream in a weald country, running a wooded valley. You could see a stone farmhouse, and an oasthouse, and an obelisk on the hill. The stream was overgrown, like a covered waggon, and you fished it by wading upstream in bare legs, casting a worm before you. It was like hockey. You could not afford to raise your rod above your shoulder, and spent most of the time disentangling it from the overhanging twigs. You lived for your rod point, navigating it between the bushes, and dangled the writhing worm in the puddles below the ripples, and fought the four-inch trouts with a heart bounding in your mouth. You can imagine that it was heaven to a boy.

“ It was heaven, and I was mad on being a sportsman, but I had a boy's perceptions. Everybody remembers the first rabbit they ever half killed, and the first bright leaping fish, and the fearful eye of the wounded bird, still cocking its snaky head, and the screaming hare. All forms of sport are horrible at first. You blood the young entry with the stinking smears of a mangled fox, and, if the child is at all sensitive, he spends the next ten minutes screaming on the ground. You make your youngster thread his own worms, and he shudders, face averted, over the oozing wriggler with its gummy exudations. You make him disgorge and kill his own fish, and he fears to hold them tight, and starts back from them as they flutter. You leave him to kill his back-broken

rabbit, with its starting eyes, and he kicks at it, and looks for inadequate twigs to hit it with, fearing to touch it, hating it for being hurt.

“ I loathed killing things, and yet I wanted to kill them. I trembled with lust for those half-pound trout, when I was on the point of catching them, and when I had caught them I was dismayed. I shuddered at knocking them on the head, had to avert my consciousness, and invented a convenient theory that it was kinder to let them suffocate. I wonder what it was. It may have been the fear of death.

“ I was a thoughtful boy, and talked to keepers and such like. A gillie, the previous season, had made me hold a salmon rod in my right hand, bent double in the proper running position, with the lure between the finger and thumb of my left. He made me do it, to feel the pull exerted on a fish. It was very little, a question of a pound or so. Even allowing for the buoyancy which would make a fish lighter in water (and, at that age, I forgot to allow for this) it seemed quite inadequate to tire a heavy salmon so quickly. It was a dreadful thought that these precious shark-backed monsters might be killed by slow attrition, by an agony worse than toothache, at the agonising hook. And then one thought of the hard-hit partridges, with the lead shot in their entrails, going gangrenous. Perhaps the hunted foxes were the worst thought of all. There was a hunt with the Grafton under Frank

Beers, on the 9th of November, 1870, when a fox from Bucknells took them for an hour and ten minutes at best pace, ran into a front door, down a passage to the back kitchen, and was killed under the table. Think of the wild creature, shooting his last bolt, running into the den of his hereditary enemies for sanctuary. That sort of thing was by no means a rare occurrence. I never was fool enough to say that a fox enjoyed being hunted, or needed to be. A fox from Easton Neston Gardens, in 1888, was run till he could not stand, and lay down in a railway cutting. Two trains came past him, but he did not move. Two platelayers came and hit him with their caps, until he began to climb the embankment. Half-way up he lay down again, and a whip was sent to stir him to the road. At last he was brought out, and staggered away, and the hounds knocked him over at a walk.

“ If you like fishing for pike with live bait, the best way is to stick two or three hooks firmly into the body of a live roach or perch, and let it swim away on the end of your trace. The pain usually kills it in a few minutes, but before that its struggles may have attracted the attention of a pike, which will finally be finished by hitting it on the head. I understand that a stag’s throat is cut, if he does not choose the alternative of being drowned. In killing a pig, you make a slight incision between the shoulder and the neck, and pry about with a long knife in order to reach the heart. A skilful

butcher can reach it at the first or second thrust. Shrimps make a thin noise, between a whistle and the sing of a kettle, while they are being boiled alive.

“ But I was telling you about my interview. It happened on a summer day, with the may-fly going up and down in their exciting nuptials, and the cattle flicking their tails, and the rich English countryside seeming to roll over on its back and offer its body to the sun. There was a hawk by the oasthouse, hanging in the blue air with a lazy motion, and two little trout lay on the bank above me, with their rosy spots unfaded.

“ As a general rule, I used to get so wrapped up in the particular puddle I was fishing that the passage of two hours would find me scarcely a hundred yards along the stream. On this day, however, I was determined to penetrate to our boundary : a hazy country, undiscovered, about a mile beyond the farm.

“ I don't know when I began to feel uncomfortable. One never met anybody, even by the farm, but I suppose the mere sight of the buildings must have been company. They vanished, as you wended up the stream.

“ I began to feel self-conscious, separated from myself. My movements became odd to me, in this deserted valley. Lonely is a word used by romantics to describe their form of life ; as such, it is inadequate to express my oddness. I was not

lonely, but alone. Absolutely alone : you must think about that. I felt cut off from humanity, surrounded only by those silent sunny meadows and the wooded slopes. It was not exactly that they watched me. They were content to surround me, standing at ease. I felt that my movements were foreign and clumsy and overlooked.

“That was the first stage ; but I wanted to reach the boundary, and imagined all sorts of better pools in front.

“After a time I began to feel frightened. It seemed ridiculous and intrusive to be fishing, and I was ashamed of my dead fish. The rod seemed silly, and there was an enmity about. But I had set myself on doing the thing, and I was not going to be a baby. I went on, fishing quickly and without interest, up the valley.

“In a way it came soon, for there was only a mile in which it could come, but in another way it was a development, a gradual accumulation to the bend. The rivulet took a turn there, and the woody hills came in, and even the obelisk had vanished. It was like stepping out of things, if you understand me : out of mankind, through looking-glasses, however you like to put it. There were two little fields by the river and then nothing but a wood, a dead end. And one was round the turn, so that there was nothing behind one either, only the trees. One had stepped into it, and the trap had closed. I knew the chestnuts were shutting

silently behind me. There was a black rabbit in the field.

“ The ancients worshipped Pan, but not like Mr. Kenneth Graham. Panic was the noun derived from his name. He was the god of nature. He was the god who had arranged that women should have children in the way they do. He was the god whose tigers clawed gaunt cattle in India, whose subjects died of alligators or festering wounds or cancer : it did not matter of what. He was the god of the animals, to which we humans are a branch. He preserved the balance of nature. He preserved us, like the pheasants at Euston. Shiva or Pan, it was the same thing : the destroyer and the preserver.

“ The black rabbit turned my exploration into panic. It sat up, looking at me, waiting for me with its ears erect. The silence of the valley was extraordinary. None of the birds were singing. I watched at an open bend, with my head just over the steep bank of the stream. There was time to steal away.

“ When I turned I nearly jumped out of my skin. There was a keeper standing on the bank behind me. The first keeper I knew had told me that he liked to have a black rabbit at the buries ; because if it disappeared he could tell at a glance whether he was being poached. I thought of this and looked back at the rabbit, but it was gone. Then I looked at the strange man, whom I had never seen before.

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“ I can’t describe his face to you. It was neither kind nor cruel, or perhaps it would be truer to say that it was both. There was the pike’s ironic mouth, bony and predatory ; but its strength had a good humour about it, and there were crow’s feet round the eyes. He stood looking down at me, with his hammer gun over the crook of his arm, in great hairy stockings and cracked boots, with ankle straps round the top of them.

“ I knew who he was at once, but his expression cured my terror. I remained afraid of him, a deferential boy trying to propitiate the unpredictable, but not actively panic-stricken : just very small and polite. I gave him my stippled fish ; and he took them in a capable paw, inclining his head, and stowed them in his poacher’s pocket. His hands were brown, horny, padded, crooking inwards at the fingers. The two trouts nestled quite easily in the one palm, side by side. He inclined his head, and stowed them, and sat down cross-legged on the bank with his gun across his knees.

“ He talked to me. At first I played up to him, asking pedantic questions, trying to keep him in a good humour, trying to be an intelligent listener, sucking up to him like a child at school. He was as terrible as a schoolmaster of those days, and as distinct a species.

“ It was only for a few moments. Nobody can be terrible who is talking truth ; and boys

distinguish it. He talked to me about the world : not the human world, with its intellectual cross purposes, but the animal one. He talked about the strange toes of the crested grebe, and the red teeth of the merganser, and grouse disease, and furunculosis, and scent, and charges of shot, and the old days of horse hair instead of gut, and the generation of the eel, and adders swallowing their young, and woodcock carrying them, and whether flies settle on the ceiling, and the spawning of salmon, and what a fish can see. It was a fascinating lecture. I was listening soon, without a trace of flunkeyism, charmed to my heart. If I could remember all he said about the ultra red and ultra violet I should be the greatest dry-fly fisherman alive. Perhaps the best joy he gave me was a simple one, which can be shared by any ignorant marksman. He broke his gun for me and made me look up the barrel, which was clean. About a cartridge length from the hammer there were the two black rings which are believed by most people to indicate the place where a special groove for the cartridge ends. I believed that there was a socket for the cartridge, slightly wider than the proper barrel, and of more or less unproofed steel. He made me investigate this socket with my finger, and then with a pencil. A simple investigation, but for a small boy it was a surprise.

“ I told him in my turn the things I had discovered. He must have known them, but he

listened with interest. We talked about the drumming of snipe. I told him of my hopes and fears. I told him that I hated killing fish, and felt sorry for them dead, that had been so lively in the water.

“He said, ‘The Colne flows through the fields of Gloucestershire. The cuckoo speaks to you all day, and dreams over the audible water. He lies under the far bank, under the alder tree, and the March browns are sailing their armadas. The river is clean water and quick, bubbling and swirling between the cresses, full of ephemerids and nymphs and shrimps. The sun sparkles on the crystal run. You can see the stones at the bottom, in the slow shallows, and a stoat has run across that sheep wire that acts as a suspension bridge. He lost his balance twice, and turned round on it like a monkey, with anxious squeaks, and has scuttled off between your legs as if you were an inanimate object. Listen to that cart horse farther down the river. He has been an ardent bather from his youth, and takes his dip three times a sunny day, rolling on his back with a surprised expression. The swallows are dipping and the sun is low. Look at the trout, how they are going mad at the hatch, butting at them shoulder to shoulder. Do you think we could reach the big fellow under the alder, in spite of the ripple between us that will drag the fly, so casting it that it will hang for just one second over his brown nose, before the drag begins?’

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“ ‘ But isn’t it cruel ? ’ I asked.

“ He only said, ‘ The Colne is clear, and runs over the cresses.’

“ He said, ‘ We are in the stubble now, and we’ve got them where they ought to be. Hark to them cheeping, with their heads up. Look at that covey on the right, going straight away from him, like chips from a sharpened pencil, and see his gun come up to throw out its fingers of smoke before the bang, and look at the two birds turning end over tip, in a flutter of exploded feathers. Here is the bang now, and the smoke hangs in the September air, and the black Labrador is working. Hie lost ! Hie lost ! We are behind the hedge for a drive, kneeling on one knee, and the first covey has come over two guns to the left, rising scarcely two feet off the ground and skimming the hedges at fifty miles an hour. He has missed them with both barrels, as well he might. And here is the second covey over the higher part, forty of them at least. The first gun has turned them, missing with both silent pointers of smoke, and the second gun has browned them with the same result, and the third gun is firing, but there is no time to attend to him. They are overhead, high and scattered, like a handful of thrown clods. The first barrel turns the picked bird over, in a somersault stone dead, and the second brings another down from the vertical, a runner that can’t go far : the first left and right of the season ! ’

“ ‘ But don’t they suffer ? ’ I asked.

“ He only said, ‘ There is a ground mist in the morning, with a tang in the air, and hundreds of well-shaped September clouds.’

“ He said, ‘ It is four in the morning, and we are after duck. What a levee it was in the black darkness, with our bleary eyes and unshaven chins, drinking rum and coffee before the dawn. And here we are in the night light, early enough to be sure that nothing will have come before us. In half an hour they will be here, a stately flight of four which we shall hear but scarcely see, and miss with both barrels. The bats will still be hawking in the early dim, and a big dragonfly rattles its wings in the reeds. Here they are again : unbirdlike, smooth, purposeful, apparently slow. The snake neck stretches out with a little knout at the end of it : sighted on a certainty. Now they are coming fast, and there is a fusillade all round the water, and the gun is hot as quick as you can load, and he goes into the water-lilies with a swash, a long shot, stone dead.’

“ I said, ‘ But it must be agony.’

“ He only answered, ‘ The last duck is circling high, with the bright dawn tinting his breasting feathers so that he looks like a pochard. The wee viper-knot of his head turns this way and that, directly above us, in anxious curiosity.’

“ ‘ Look here,’ I said. ‘ What about the hunted fox ? ’

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“ ‘Hounds are running,’ he said, ‘with a cry that rings the woods. Hark to them chiming to it, and the huntsman’s horn. Whilst the field was coffee-housing by the bridle gate we edged away to the right, and that is our line. We feel like going this winter morning. Here is a gate, which we can open with plenty of time, and now we are on firm pasture with the fences ahead. The first is a far side ditch, which is meat and drink to us, however wide and deep it is. The second is a bullfinch, taken at a scramble, with our hats over our eyes. Now the valley dips below us, and we can count the fences ahead, half a dozen blue bars stretching into the distance at our feet. The fields are emeralds between them and the high clouds hang over, and the twigs will crackle.’

“ I said, ‘They will tear him to pieces.’

“ He said, ‘They are matched in mouth like bells.’

“ ‘Look at the slaty water,’ he said, ‘with a scum of bubbles floating down the ripple. You would think it was a hopeless day for salmon, but with fish you never know. We have given up hope and are casting mechanically with the wind behind us, taking pleasure in the cast itself. Hard back and gently forward ; let it take itself. It is good to cast straight, with a huge Mar Lodge plopping at the end of a sizzle of straight gut, if there isn’t a fish in the world. The gillie is smoking his pipe on a

game bag, watching us with friendly interest and commiseration. He has few hopes from the colour of the water, but our tenacity gives him pleasure. There was a fish leaped ten minutes ago, a vertical monster suddenly displaying his belly and spread gills, and anybody but a fool would give it up. But he has been leaping there at intervals all day, and they may not be running. Perhaps it is something else. Hence the Mar Lodge. This is the sixth lure we have tried to tempt him with, more to pass the time than anything else. We started with a trout fly, a claret and teal. Try him for the last time with this black contrivance, that has never taken a fish before. It's as big as a boat-hook, pitch black, with silver round the body. None but a lunatic salmon would take it, and nobody but a lunatic would make the offer, but perhaps we are both mad. And, by God, it has got him. Wow ! says the gillie, and is on his feet. Hold him for dear life. Look at the line cutting the water, cruising the pool like a wire cutting cheese. Now look collectedly at your wrist watch and note the time. We take a pride in killing them under ten minutes. Look out, you will have to give in to him : but grudgingly, only by a few turns. We'll take him for a saunter down the stream. Five minutes and we haven't had a sight of him, not even a rusty flash in the water. Now he's taking the law into his own hands, and we've got to follow him up the bank. Never mind, go with him,

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it will tire him out. Look out ! He is going to leap. There he goes with a flash and a flurry. Drop your rod point as he smacks in on his side, and tighten up, and almost before you're ready he's out again. Three leaps like fury, in quick succession. What a noise he makes ! I should judge him at fourteen pounds. Now he's beginning to tire, now we've got him on the hip. Don't be a genteel angler and fiddle with him for forty minutes. Bring him in now, with a ruthless hand. Tell that gillie to drop the gaff. We aren't going to be a gentleman. Now feel for it with your left hand, bending at the knees, with the rod high above your head in the right. You can take the cork off with finger and thumb. Here he is below us, beginning to turn on his side, but he catches his first glimpse as we hover above him, and goes off like a flash. All right, my beauty, you can go once round the pool. Bring him round in a circle and navigate him to your feet. As you step down he will be off again, but this time the circle is only a few yards. Now we've got him in a little bay, and he lies burrowing at the bank, which makes us fear for our gut. Lay the gaff along his side quite gently. No hacking and snatching. Now is the time. Everything depends on this. Now for the firm piercing draw. And here you are, staggering up the bank, with fourteen pounds of silver and black flapping on the end of your gaff handle.'

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“ I said, ‘ Poor fish ! ’

“ ‘ Yes,’ said the Keeper Pan, nodding his head,
‘ but in Scotland the line cuts the water, like a
wire cutting cheese.’ ”

THE END

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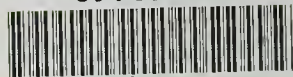
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